THE UNDEFEATED

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BY

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DEDICATED RESPECTFULLY

TO

"A DECENT AND A DAUNTLESS PEOPLE"

THE UNDEFEATED

I

IT was hot.

It was so hot that a certain Mr. William Hollis sitting on an old bacon box in the lee of a summer-house in his lock-up garden had removed coat and waistcoat tie and collar, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and loosened his braces. The presence of a neighbor's elbows on the party hedge forbade a complete return to nature, but the freedom of Old Man Adam from the restraints imposed by society was envied just now by one at least of his heirs.

By the side of Bill Hollis was a stone jar of Blackhampton ale, a famous brew, but even this could not save him from gasping like a carp. It was a scorcher and no mistake—thick, slab and hazy, the sort of heat you can almost cut with a knife.

Leaning gracefully across from the next plot was a large, rotund gentleman with the face of a well nourished ferret. Draped in an artful festoon beneath an old straw hat, a wreath of burdock leaves defended him from the weather. "Mr. Hollis"—he addressed the man on the bacon box with conversa-

tional charm—"if you want my opinion they're putting in a bit of overtime in Hell."

"Mr. Goldman, you've got it." His neighbor, a man of somber imagination, was struck by the force of the image. First he glanced up to a sky of burnished copper and then he glanced down over the edge of sheer hillside upon which he and his friend were poised like a couple of black ants on the face of a hayrick. Below he saw a cauldron in which seethed more than a quarter of a million souls. Floating above the cauldron and its many thousands of chimneys was a haze of soot thick enough to conceal what in point of mere size was the fourteenth city of Great Britain. But speaking geographically, and Blackhampton's inhabitants were prone to do that, it was the exact center of England, of the United Kingdom, of the British Empire, and therefore—

Somewhere in the mind of William Hollis lurked a poet, a philosopher and an artist. He pointed over the dip of the hill into the middle of the cauldron. "Reminds me," he said, half to himself, for he was not consciously an artist, "of the Inferno of Dant, with Lustrations by Door."

Mr. Goldman frowned at the simile. What else could he do? He was a solid citizen, of a solid city, of a solid empire: he was not merely a Philistine, he was proud of being a Philistine. He suddenly remembered that his neighbor was a failure as a man of business. And in a flash Mr. Goldman knew why.

"Yes, Hollis—hot." The ferret-faced gentleman spoke with more caution and less charm. Commercially and socially he was secure, but the same could hardly be said for the man on the bacon box who spoke of the Inferno of Dant with Lustrations by Door—whatever the Inferno of Dant with Lustrations by Door might be.

"Hot enough, Mr. Goldman, to melt those three brass balls of yours." It was a graceful allusion to a trade symbol, yet a prosperous pawnbroker felt that in making it a semi-bankrupt green grocer was verging upon the familiar. He had just reached that conclusion when a boy selling papers came along the narrow lane that ran past the end of the garden, and thrust a tousled head over the fence.

"Four o'clock, mister?"

Bill Hollis produced a halfpenny. A minute later he produced a note of disgust. "County's beat. Yorkshire won by an innings an' four runs. Funny thing, our chaps can't never play against Yorkshire—not for sour apples."

Mr. Goldman gave a slow deep grunt and then artistically readjusted his garland.

"Hirst six for twenty-two. Them Tykes can *bahl* a bit. Rhodes four for nineteen."

Mr. Goldman grunted again. And it was now clear by the look in his small eyes that disapproval was intended. The Inferno of Dant with Lustrations by Door was still in his mind. That was the key to his

neighbor's financial failure, but this squandering of money, time and brain power on things of no value was just as significant.

"Cricket." The tone was very scornful. "One o' these days cricket is going to be the ruin of the country."

William Hollis stoutly dissented. "It's cricket that makes us what we are."

"It's business, Hollis, that makes a country." There was an accession of moral superiority in the pawnbroker's tone. "That's the thing that counts. All this sport is ruination—ruination, Hollis—the road to nowhere."

William Hollis was unconvinced, but a man so successful had him at a hopeless disadvantage. In theory he was sure that he was right, but the pawnbroker knew that he had just made a composition with his creditors, so that it didn't matter how sound the argument or how honest the cause, he was out of court. Truth doesn't matter. It is public opinion that matters. And public opinion is conditioned by many subtleties, among which a banking account is foremost.

Bill Hollis covered his retreat from a position that should have been impregnable, by turning to another part of the paper which was the Blackhampton *Evening Star.*

"Ultimatum to Serbia. Ugly situation. I don't think."

Mr. Goldman asked why he didn't.

"A dodge to sell the paper."

"I expect you're right," said the pawnbroker judicially. "They've always got some flam or other."

"Civil war in Ireland," announced Bill Hollis.

"I daresay. And next week we shall have the sea serpent and the giant gooseberry. And all for a halfpenny, mark you. We're living in great days, Hollis."

The little greengrocer was silent a moment and then he said thoughtfully, "I sometimes think, Mr. Goldman, what this country wants is a really good war."

Mr. Goldman smiled in a superior way. "Well, I don't mind telling you," he said, "that I've thought that for the last twenty years. Not this country only, but Europe, the whole world."

"You're right, Mr. Goldman." There was a grandeur in the conception that in spite of the weather almost moved his neighbor to enthusiasm.

"Stands to reason, my boy, and I'll tell you why. The world is overpoppylated. Look at this town of ours." With the finger of an Olympian the pawnbroker pointed down the hillside to the smoking cauldron below. "Poppylation two hundred and sixty odd thousand at the last census. And when I first set up in business, the year before the Franco-Prussian War, it was seventy-two thousand. And it's not only here, it's all over the world alike."

"That is so, Mr. Goldman. And they say that in

America it's even worse. In fact, wherever you look the competition is cruel."

"Yes, Hollis, a real good war would do a power of good. We want Old Boney back again—then there might be breathing space for a bit. As it is this country is overrun with aliens."

William assented gloomily.

"This town of ours, my boy, is crawling with Germans. They come over here and take the bread out of our mouths. They work for nothing and they live on nothing. They learn all our trades and then they go back to the Fatherland, and undersell us."

Said Bill Hollis with the air of a prophet, "I reckon that sooner or later we'll be having a scrap with the Germans."

"Not likely." The pawnbroker's tone was a little contemptuous. "The Germans can get all they want without fighting. Peaceful penetration's their game. They are the cleverest nation in the world. In another twenty years they'll own it all."

Upon this last expression of his wisdom Mr. Goldman gave a final touch to his straw hat and its cool garland, waddled down a box-bordered path and out of the gate at the bottom of his garden.

II

THE departure of Mr. Goldman left a void in the heart of Mr. William Hollis. He was a sociable man, with a craving for the company of his fellows, and although for quite a long time now his distinguished neighbor had been clearly labeled in his mind as "a pursy old pig," he was an interesting person to talk to when he was in the humor. He was not always in the humor, it was true, for he was a "warm" man, an owner of house property; therefore he was in the happy position of not having to be civil to anybody when he didn't feel like it. This afternoon, however, he had unbent.

The slowly receding form of Mr. Goldman waddled along by the hedge, turned into the lane, passed from view. In almost the same moment William Hollis felt a severe depression. He had reached the stage of life and fortune when he could not bear to be alone. With a kind of dull pain he realized that this was his forty-first birthday and that he had failed in life.

He was going down the hill. Unless he could take a pull on himself he was done. Already it might be too late. The best part of his life was behind him. A year ago that day, in this very garden, his only source of happiness, he had told himself that; two

years ago, three years ago, five years ago, this had been the burden of his thoughts. But he was in a rut and there seemed to be no way out.

Twenty years ago he had felt it was in him to do something. He was an ambitious young fellow with a mind that looked forward to the day after to-morrow. Such a man ought to have done something. But now he knew that there had been a soft spot in him somewhere and that a moral and mental dry rot had already set in. He was a talker, a thinker, a dreamer; action was not his sphere. Unless he took a strong pull on himself he was out of the race.

He poured what remained of the jar of ale into the earthenware mug he kept for the purpose—Blackhampton ale tastes better out of a mug—and drank it slowly, without relish. Then he cut a few flowers to take home to his wife—to the wife who hadn't spoken to him for nearly a week—arranged them in a bunch, with the delicacy of one unconsciously sensitive to form and color, looped a bit of twitch neatly round them, put on his coat, a stained and worn alpaca, put on his hat, a battered, disreputable straw, cast the eye of a lover round his precious garden, locked its dilapidated green door and started down the lane and down the hill towards the city.

It was now five o'clock and a little cooler, yet William Hollis walked very slowly. There was a lot of time to kill before the day was through. But his thoughts were biting him harder than ever as he turned

into the famous road leading to the city, known as The Rise. This salubrious eminence, commanding the town from the northeast, was sacred to the city magnates. When a man made good in Blackhampton, really good, he built a house on The Rise. It was the ambition of every true Blackhamptonian to express his individuality in that way. Until he had achieved a house entirely to his own fancy and taste on The Rise, no son of Blackhampton could be said really to have "arrived."

William Hollis trudged slowly along a well kept road, between two irregular lines of superb villas, gleaming with paint and glass, standing well back from the road in ample grounds of their own, with broad and trim gravel approaches. The first on the right was Rosemere, the residence of Sir Reuben Jope, three times Mayor of Blackhampton, a man of large fortune and robust taste, whose last expression was greenhouses and conservatories. They were said to produce fabulous things—flowers, fruits, shrubs, plants known only to tropical countries. Many a time from afar had Bill gazed upon them with rather wistful awe.

A little farther along was The Haven, the ancestral home of the Clints, a famous Blackhampton family whose local prestige was on a par with that of the Rothschilds in the city of London. Across the road was The Gables, the modest house of Lawyer Mossop, the town's leading solicitor; then on the right,

again, the reticulated dwelling of the philanthropic Stephen Mortimore, head of the great engineering firm of Mortimore, Barrow, and Mortimore. For a true son of Blackhampton these were names to conjure with. Even to walk along such a road gave one a feeling of worldly success, financial security, aristocratic exclusiveness.

Still a little further along on the left was what was clearly intended to be the *pièce de resistance* of The Rise. It was the brand-new residence of the very latest arrival and no house had been more discussed by Blackhampton society. It was intended to eclipse every other dwelling on The Rise, but it was of nondescript design, half suburban villa, half mediæval castle. From the æsthetic standpoint the result was so little satisfactory that a local wit had christened it "Dammit 'All."

As "Dammit 'All" came into view, Bill Hollis found an almost morbid fascination in gazing at its turrets and the tower so regally crowning them. It was the house of his father-in-law, Mr. Josiah Munt. Sixteen years ago, in that very month of July, an ambitious young man had married his master's eldest daughter. Melia Munt had espoused Bill Hollis in direct defiance of her father's wishes and had lived long enough already to rue the day. Josiah, at that time, was not the great man he had since become, but he was a hard, unbending parent; and he gave Melia to understand clearly that if she married Hollis he would never

speak to her again. Melia chose to defy him, as he always thought out of sheer perversity, and her implacable father had been careful to keep his word to the letter. Not again did he mention her name; not again did her old home receive her.

In those sixteen years Josiah Munt had gone up in the world, and if William Hollis could not be said to have come down in it, he had certainly made very little headway. At the time of his marriage he was the chief barman at "the Duke of Wellington," an extremely thriving public house, at the corner of Waterloo Square in the populous southeastern part of the city. He was now a small greengrocer in Love Lane, within a stone's throw of the famous licensed house of his father-in-law, and he was continually haunted by the problem of how much longer he would be able to carry on his business. On the other hand, his old master had prospered so much that he had recently built for himself a fine house on The Rise.

Mr. Josiah Munt was still the owner of the Duke of Wellington. Over the top of its swing doors his name appeared below the spirited effigy of the Iron Duke as "licensed to sell wines, spirits, beer and tobacco," but years ago he had ceased to reside there with his family. As far as possible he liked to disassociate himself from it in the public mind, but he was too shrewd a man to part with the goose that laid the golden eggs; besides, in his heart, there was a tender spot for the old house which had been the

foundation of his fortunes. His womenfolk might despise it; in some ways he had outgrown it himself; but he knew better than to crab his luck by parting with an extremely valuable property which at the present time was not appreciated at its true worth by the surveyor of rates and taxes.

As William Hollis trudged along the dusty road and his father-in-law's new and amazing house came into view, he became the prey of many emotions. The sight of this magnificence was a bitter pill to swallow. It brought back vividly to his mind the scene that was printed on it forever—the scene that followed his diffident request for the hand of Melia. He could still hear the stinging taunts of his employer, he could still feel the impact of Josiah's boot. It may have been that boot—for women are queer!—which caused the final capitulation of Melia. But the hard part was that time had justified the prediction of her far-sighted parent. Melia in throwing herself away on "a man of no class" would do a bad day's work when she married Hollis.

It had been the son-in-law's intention to give the lie to that prophecy. But!—there was a kink in him somewhere. He had always loved to dream of the future, yet he had not the power of making his dreams come true. If only he had had a good education! If only he had known people who could have put him on the right road to success when he was young and sharp and the sap was in his brain! If only there

hadn't been so much competition, so much to fight against; if only he could have had a bit of luck; if only Melia had really cared for him; if only he hadn't speculated with the hundred pounds she had inherited from her Aunt Elizabeth; if only he wasn't so apt to be hurt by things that didn't matter a damn!

William Hollis was a disappointed and embittered man. Life had gone wrong with him; but a small jar of Blackhampton Old Ale softens failure and evokes the quality of self-pity. However, as he approached Mr. Munt's gate and gained a clearer view of the newest and most imposing house on The Rise, the sense of failure rose in him to a pitch that was hard to bear. So this was what Melia's father had done! No wonder she despised a man like himself. It was not very surprising after all that she hardly threw a word to him now from one day's end to another.

III

A MAN in an apron that had once been white and in a cloth cap that had once been navy blue was painting a series of bold letters on Mr. Josiah Munt's front gate. Bill Hollis was overwhelmed with depression, but at this interesting sight curiosity stirred him. He advanced upon the decorative artist who was whistling gently over a job in which he took a pride and a pleasure. Upon the ornate front of the large green gate was being inscribed the word

STRATHFIELDSAYE

Bill recognized the artist as a near neighbor of his own in Love Lane.

"Working for the Nobs, are you, Wickens?" There was a world of scorn in the tone of William Hollis, a world of sarcasm. And yet what was scorn and what was sarcasm in the presence of a hard fact, clear, outstanding, fully accomplished!

The artist expectorated a silent affirmative.

"Piecework, I suppose? Cut rates?" Mr. Munt had the reputation of being a very keen man of business.

The artist was too much absorbed in his labors to indulge in promiscuous talk.

William Hollis peered through the gate, to the rows of newly planted shrubs on either side the curving carriage drive. "Bleeding upstart" he muttered; then he turned on his heel and walked on up the road.

He had gone but a few yards when quite unexpectedly he came upon a massive figure in a black and white checked summer suit and a white billy-cock hat worn at a rather rakish angle. It was his father-in-law and they were face to face.

Mr. Munt was proceeding with a kind of elephantine dignity along the exact center of the sidewalk, and instinctively, before he was aware of what he had done, his son-in-law by stepping nimbly into the grassgrown gutter had conceded it to him. But in almost the same instant he scorned himself for his action; and the gesture of lordly indifference with which the proprietor of the Duke of Wellington directed his gaze upon the western gables of Strathfieldsaye, without a flicker of recognition of the person who had made way for him, suddenly brought William Hollis to the bursting point.

The world allows that in a stone jar of Blackhampton Old Ale there are magic qualities; and far down in Bill himself was hidden some deep strain of independent manhood. The City records proved—vide Bazeley's famous Annals of Blackhampton, a second-hand copy of which was one of his most cherished pos-

sessions—that the name of Hollis had been known and honored in the town long before the name of Munt had been heard of. The Hollises were an old and distinguished Blackhampton clan. A William Hollis was mayor of the Borough in the year of the Armada. It was a family of wide ramifications. There was the great John Hollis the inventor, circa 1724-1798, there was Henry Hollis the poet, circa 1747-1801. Of these their present descendant was a kinsman so remote that the science of genealogy had lost track of their actual relationship. But beyond a doubt his father's uncle, Troop Sergeant Major William Hollis, had fought at Waterloo. He himself was named after that worthy, and the old boy's portrait and portions of his kit had long embellished the sitting room in Love Lane.

It was then, perhaps, force of ancestry quite as much as the virtue of the Blackhampton ale that moved William Hollis to his sudden and remarkable act of self-assertion. For as Josiah Munt passed him, head in air, and weather eye fixed upon the western gables of Strathfieldsaye, his son-in-law stopped, swung round and called after him in a voice that could be heard even by the decorative artist at work on the gate—

"Sally out of Quod yet?"

IV

BY not so much as the quiver of an eyelid did Mr. Munt betray that he had even heard, much less taken cognizance, of that which amounted to a studied insult on the part of William Hollis. The proprietor of the Duke of Wellington converged upon the gate of Strathfieldsaye with head upheld, with dignity unimpaired. He even cast one cool glance at the handiwork of the inspired Wickens, but made no comment upon it, while the artist suspended his labors, opened the gate obsequiously, and waited for the great man to pass through. But when Mr. Munt had walked along the carriage drive to within a few yards of his newly bedizened front door, he stopped all of a sudden like a man who has received a blow in the face.

Had Bill Hollis at that moment been able to obtain a glimpse of his father-in-law he would have seen that his shaft had gone right home. A sternly domineering countenance was distorted with passion. There was a rage of suffering in the fierce yellow-brown eyes, there was a twist of half strangled torment in the lines of the hard mouth. As the lord of Strathfieldsaye stood clenching his hands in the center of the gravel he was not an attractive figure. Before entering the house he took off the white hat and

soothed the pressure upon head and neck by passing over them a red bandanna handkerchief.

A trim parlor maid, bright as a new pin, received the lord of Strathfieldsaye. The smart and shining creature was in harmony with her surroundings. Everything in the spacious and lofty entrance hall shone with paint and polish, with new curtains, new carpets, new fittings, new furniture.

Mr. Munt handed his hat to the parlor maid rather roughly. "Tea's in the drawing-room, sir," she said, calmly and modestly. It was the air of a very superior servant.

Josiah went into the drawing-room and found two ladies drinking tea and consuming cake, strawberries and cream and bread and butter. One was a depressed lady in puce silk to whom her lord paid little attention; the other was much more sprightly, although by no means in the first blush of youth. She had the air of a visitor.

Before heralding his arrival by any remark, Mr. Munt gazed with an air of genuine satisfaction round the large cool room smelling of paint and general newness, and then he said in a tone of rather grim heartiness to the more sprightly of the two ladies, "Well, Gert, what do you think on us?"

There was a careful marshaling of manner on the part of the lady addressed as Gert. "Almost *too* grand, Josiah—since you ask my opinion. Still I've been telling Maria that she must show Spirit."

The nod of Josiah might be said to express approval. Miss Gertrude Preston was a half-sister of his wife, and she was perhaps the only woman among his strictly limited acquaintance who was able to sustain a claim to his respect. She had character and great common sense and having acted for many years as resident companion to no less a person than Lawyer Mossop's aunt, the late Miss Selina Gregg, she had seen something of the world. Upon all subjects her views were well considered and uncommonly shrewd; therefore they were not to be passed over lightly. Aunt Gerty was a favorite of Josiah, not merely for the reason that "she knew a bit more than most," but also because she was clever enough to play up to his rising fortunes and growing renown.

"Maria shown you round?" said Josiah, accepting a cup of tea from the graceful hands of his sister-in-law.

The depressed lady in puce silk sighed a limp yes.

"Eggshell china tea service," Gerty fixed a purposeful eye upon Josiah's cup.

"Out of old Nickerson's sale," Josiah performed an audible act of deglutition. "Four pun ten the set. Slop basin's cracked though."

"I see it is, but you have a bargain, Josiah. You always seem to have a bargain, no matter what you buy."

Josiah purred under the subtle flattery.

"Seen that chayney vawse?" He pointed across the

room to a pedestal upon which was a blue china bowl.

"Looks like genuine Ming," Gertrude opened a pair of long-handled tortoise-shell glasses. There was less than a score of ladies in the whole of Blackhampton who sported glasses of that ultra-fashionable kind, but Miss Preston was one of them.

"That young feller Parish said it was genuine and he ought to know."

"Charming," Gerty sighed effectively; then her eyes went slowly round the room. "This room is perfect. And such a view. You stand so high that you can look right over the city without knowing that it's there. And there's the Sharrow beyond. Isn't that Corfield Weir on the right?"

Rather proudly Josiah said that it was Corfield Weir.

"And that great bank of trees going up into the sky must be Dibley Chase."

"Dibley right enough," vouched Josiah. "Have you had a look from the tower?"

"Yes, I have. Wonderful. Maria says on a clear day you can see Cliveden Castle."

"Aye. And a sight farther than that. You can see three counties up there. To my mind, Gert, this house stands on the plumb bit of The Rise."

Gertrude fully agreed.

"So it ought if it comes to that. I had to pay seven and sixpence a yard for the land, before I could put a brick on it."

Gertrude was impressed.

"What do you think o' that oak paneling in the dining room?"

She thought it was charming.

"Has Maria shown you the greenus—I should say conservatory—an' the rockery—an' the motor garidge? We haven't got the motor yet, but it's coming next week."

Gertrude had seen these things. It only remained for her to enter upon a diplomatic rapture at the recital of their merits.

"No strawberries, thank you," Josiah's voice was rather sharp as the depressed lady tactlessly offered these delicacies at a moment when her lord was fully engaged in describing the unparalleled difficulties he had had to surmount in order to get the water fountain beyond the tennis lawn to work properly.

"Fact o' the matter is, our Water Board wants wackenin' up."

"Well, you are the man to do that, Josiah. You are an alderman now."

"I am." The slight note of inflation was unconscious. "And old Scrimshire an' that pettifoggin' crew are goin' to have a word in season from Alderman Munt."

"Mustn't get yourself disliked though."

Josiah smiled sourly. "Gel," he said, "a man worth his salt is never afraid o' being unpopular. Right is right an' wrong is no man's right. Our Water Board's

got to be run on new lines. It's a disgrace to the city."

Miss Preston was far too wise to offer an opinion upon that matter. She knew, none better, the limits imposed by affairs upon the sex to which she belonged. But she was very shrewd and perceptive and underneath the subtle flatteries she dealt out habitually to this brother-in-law of hers was a genuine respect for great abilities and his terrific force of character.

Among all the outstanding figures in Blackhampton his was perhaps the least attractive. His name, in polite circles, was almost a byword, for he never studied the feelings of anybody; he deferred only to his own will and invariably took the shortest way to enforce it. There was generally a covert laugh or a covert sneer at the mention of his name and the house he had recently built on The Rise had set a seal upon his unpopularity. Nevertheless, the people who knew him best respected him most. His sister-in-law knew him very well indeed.

Maria poured out a second cup of tea rather nervously for Josiah to whom Miss Preston handed it archly.

"No cake, thanks. I dussent." He tapped his chest significantly; then he cast a complacent glance through the wide-flung drawing-room windows to the fair pleasaunce beyond. "So you think, Gert, take it altogether, this is a cut above Waterloo Villa, eh?"

Gertrude's only answer to such a question was a discreet laugh.

"Waterloo Villa was *so* comfortable," sighed the depressed lady in puce silk.

"But there's no comparison, Maria, really no comparison." It was wonderful how the caressing touch of the woman of the world dispersed the cloud upon Josiah's brow almost before it had time to gather.

"Of course there isn't, Gerty. Any one with a grain o' sense knows that. Why, only this morning as I went down in the tram with Lawyer Mossop, he said, 'Mr. Munt, this new house of yours is quite the pick of the basket.' "

"It is, Josiah." The discreet voice rose to enthusiasm. "And no one knows that better than Maria."

The lady in puce silk gave a little sigh and a little sniff. "Waterloo Villa was quite good enough for *me,*" she murmured tactlessly.

V

THERE was silence for a moment and then said Josiah: "Talking of Lawyer Mossop—that reminds me. I'm going round to see him. I wonder what time he gets back from his office." He looked at his watch. "Quarter past five. Bit too soon, I suppose."

Maria ventured to ask what he wanted Lawyer Mossop for.

Josiah did not answer the question immediately. When he did answer it his voice had such a depth of emotion that both ladies felt as if a knife had been plunged suddenly into their flesh.

"I'm goin' to take our Sally out of my will." There was something almost terrible in the sternness and finality of the words.

The depressed lady in puce silk gave a gasp. A moment afterwards large tears began to drip freely from her eyes.

Aunt Gerty sat very upright on a satinwood chair, her hands folded in front of her, and two prominent teeth showing beyond a line of extremely firm lips. She didn't speak.

"Nice thing"—each word was slowly distilled from a feeling of outrage that was almost unbear-

able—"to be made the talk and the mark of the whole city. And after what I've done for that gel! School—college — France — Germany — your advice, you know, Gerty——"

Aunt Gerty didn't speak.

"And then she comes home and gets herself six weeks' hard labor. Hard labor, mark you!"

Both ladies shivered audibly.

"Nice thing for a man who has always kept himself up, to have his daughter pitchin' brick ends through the windows of the Houses o' Parliament, to say nothin' of assaulting the police. Gerty, that comes of higher education."

Still Aunt Gerty didn't speak.

"Fact is, women ain't ripe for higher education. It goes to their heads. But I'll let her see. In a few minutes I'll be off round to Lawyer Mossop."

"But—Josiah!" ventured a quavering voice.

"Not a word, Mother. My mind's made up. That gel has fairly made the name o' Munt stink in the nostrils of the nation. Not ten minutes ago that rotten little dog Bill Hollis flung it in my teeth as I came in at the front gate. The little wastrel happened to be passing and he called after me, 'Sally out of Quod yet?' One o' these days I'll quod him—the little skunk—or Josiah Munt J.P. is not my name."

Maria continued to weep copiously but in silence. She dare not make her grief vocal with the stern eye of her husband upon her. The tragedy of her eldest

girl's defiance, now sixteen years old, was still green in her memory. Josiah had given Amelia plainly to understand that if she married William Hollis he would never speak to her again and he had kept his word. Maria had not got over it even yet; and now their youngest girl, Sally, on whose upbringing a fabulous sum had been lavished, had disgraced them in the sight of everybody.

Josiah was meting out justice no doubt, but mothers are apt to be irrational where their offspring are concerned; and had Maria been able to muster the courage she would have broken a lance with him, even now, in this matter of the youngest girl. But she was afraid of him. And she knew he was in the right. Sally's name had appeared in all the papers. That morning, by a cruel stroke, they had come out with her portrait—Miss Sarah Ann Munt, youngest daughter of Alderman Munt J.P. of Blackhampton, sentenced to six weeks hard labor. Yes, it was cruel! It would take her father a long time to get over it. And for Maria herself, it was like the loss in infancy of the young Josiah; it was a thing she would always remember but never quite be able to grasp.

The silence grew intolerable. At last it was broken by Gertrude Preston.

"You'll be having splendid roses, Josiah—next year." Those mincing tones, quite cool and untroubled, somehow did wonders. Josiah had always been a noted rose grower and as his sister-in-law pointed

elegantly to the rows of young bushes beyond the drawing-room windows something in him began to respond. After all that was his great asset as a human entity: the power to react strongly and readily to the many things in which he was interested.

"Aye," he said, almost gratefully. "Next year they'll be a sight. I've had a double course o' manure put down."

"I hope there'll be some of my favorite Gloire de Dijons," said Gerty with fervor.

"You bet there will be. There's a dozen bushes over yond. By the way, Gert, you're comin' to the show to-morrow week."

Miss Preston, for all her enthusiasm for roses, was not sure that she could get to the show. But Josiah informed her that she would *have* to come. And he enforced his command by taking a leather case from his breast pocket and producing a small blue card on which was printed:

BLACKHAMPTON AND DISTRICT ROSE GROWERS' ASSOCIATION

PRESIDENT, ALDERMAN JOSIAH MUNT J.P.

The twenty-seventh annual Show will be held in the Jubilee Park on Tuesday, August the Fourth. Prizes will be presented at six o'clock to successful competitors by Mrs. Alderman Munt. The Blackhampton Prize Brass Band will be in attendance. Dancing in the evening, weather permitting.

Admission one shilling.

"That'll get you in, Gert." The card was placed in her hand. "Come and stand by Maria and keep her up to it."

Had Maria dared she would have groaned dismally. As it was she had to be content with a slight gesture of dismay.

"You see it'll be a bit o' practice for her. In 1916 —the year after next—she'll be the Mayoress."

The lady in puce silk shuddered audibly.

VI

IN the process of time the clock on the drawing-room chimneypiece chimed six and Josiah "stepped round" to Lawyer Mossop's.

That celebrity lived at The Gables, the next house but one along The Rise. Outwardly a more modest dwelling than Strathfieldsaye, it was less modern in style, more reticent, more compact. As Josiah walked up the drive he noted with approval its well-kept appearance and its fine display of rhododendrons, phlox, delphiniums, purple irises and many other things that spoke to him. He was a genuine lover of flowers.

Mr. Munt's pressure of the electric button was answered by a manservant in a starched shirt and a neat black cutaway. The visitor noted him carefully as he noted everything. "I wonder what he pays a month for that jockey!" was the form the memorandum took on the tablets of his mind.

"Mr. Mossop in?"

"If you'll come this way I'll inquire, sir."

Josiah was led across a square-tiled hall, covered in the center by a Persian rug, into a room delightfully cool, with a large window in a western angle opening on to a pergola ablaze with roses, along which the westering sun streamed amazingly.

"What name, sir?"

"Hey?" Josiah frowned. As if there was a man, woman or child in Blackhampton who didn't know him! Still, it was good style. "Munt—Mr. Munt."

"Thank you, sir!" The manservant bowed and withdrew.

Yes, it was good style. And this cool, clean but rather somber room had the same elusive quality. Three of its four walls were covered with neat rows of books, for the most part in expensive bindings. Style again. All the same the visitor looked a little doubtfully upon those shining shelves. Books were not in his line, and although he did not go quite to the length of despising them he was well content that they shouldn't be. Books stood for education, and in the purview of Mr. Josiah Munt, "if they didn't watch it education was going to be the ruin of the country."

Still to that room, plainly but richly furnished, those rows of shining leather lent a tone, a value. A shrewd eye ran them up and down. Meredith—Swinburne—Tennyson—Browning — Dickens — Thackeray — all flams, of course, but harmless, if not carried too far. Personally he preferred a good billiard room, but no one in Blackhampton disputed that Lawyer Mossop was the absolute head of his profession; he could be trusted therefore to know what he was doing. There was one of these books open on a very good table—forty guineas worth of anybody's money—printed in a foreign language, French probably, of which he

couldn't read a word. Il Purgatorio, Dante. Fine bit of printing. Wonderful paper! Yes, wonderful! He handled it appraisingly. And then he realized that Lawyer Mossop was in the room and smiling at him in that polite way, that was half soft sawder, half good feeling. The carpet was so thick that he had not heard him come in.

"Good evening, Mr. Munt." The greeting was very friendly and pleasant. "Sit down, won't you?"

"No, I'll stand—and grow better." Mr. Munt had a stock of stereotyped pleasantries which he kept for social use. They seemed to make for ease and geniality.

The two men stood looking at each other, the solicitor all rounded corners and quiet ease, the client stiff, angular, assertive, perhaps a shade embarrassed.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Munt?"

The answer was slow in coming. It was embodied in a harsh growl. "Mossop, I want you to take that gel of mine, Sally, out of my will."

The lawyer said nothing, but pursed his lips a little. a way he had when setting the mind to work, but that was the only expression of visible feeling in the heavily lined face.

"Excuse my troubling you to-night, Mossop. But I felt I couldn't wait. Give me an appointment for the morning and I'll look in at the office. Nice goings on! And to think what her education cost me!"

The lawyer made a silent gesture, spreading his

hands like a stage Frenchman, half dismay, half tacit protest.

"Better have a new document, eh?" The outraged parent had been already dismissed; the highly competent man of affairs was now in control. "My second girl, Ethel, Mrs. Doctor Cockburn, can have it all now, except"—Josiah hesitated an instant—"except five thousand pounds I shall leave to Gertrude Preston."

Lawyer Mossop was still silent. But the mobile lips were working curiously. "Not for me to advise," he said at last, very slowly, with much hesitation, "but if I might——"

Josiah cut him short with a stern lift of the hand. "I know what you're going to say, but if she was your gel what'd you do, eh?"

Lawyer Mossop rubbed his cheek perplexedly. "At bottom I might be rather proud of her."

"You—might—be—rather—proud—of—her!" It was the tone of Alderman Munt J.P. to a particularly unsatisfactory witness at a morning session at the City Hall. An obvious lie, yet a white one because it was used for a moral purpose. Mossop had no ax to grind; he merely wanted to soften things a bit for a client and neighbor. "You can't tell *me,* Mossop, you really think *that.*"

The solicitor gazed steadily past the purple face of his client through the open window to the riot of color beyond. "Why not?" he said. "Think of the pluck required to do a thing like that."

Josiah shook his head angrily. "It's the devil that's in her." He spoke with absolute conviction. "And it's always been there. When she was that high"—he made an indication with his hand—"I've fair lammoxed her, but I could never turn her an inch. If she wanted to do a thing she'd do it—and if she didn't nothing would make her."

"A lady of strong character."

"Cussedness, my friend, cussedness. The devil. And it's brought her to this."

The lawyer, however, shook his head gently. "Well, Mr. Munt, as I say, it is not for me to advise, but if she was a daughter of mine——"

"You'd be proud of her." The sneer was rather ugly.

"In a way—yes—perhaps . . . I don't say positively . . . because one quite sees . . . On the other hand, I might . . . I don't say I should . . . I *might* be just as angry as you are."

The thundercloud began to lift a little. "Come now, that's sense. Of course, Mossop, you'd be as mad as anybody—it's human nature. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry pointin' the finger of scorn"—*Sally out of Quod yet* was still searing him like a flame—"you'd be so mad, Mossop, that you'd want to forget that she belonged to you."

"It might be so." Mr. Mossop's far-looking eyes were still fixed on the pergola. "At the same time, before I took any definite step, I think I should give

myself a clear fortnight in which to think it over."

Josiah laughed harshly. "No, Mossop—not if you were as mad as I am."

It was so true that the solicitor was not able to reply.

"When I think on her"—the great veins began to swell in the head and neck of the lord of Strathfields-aye—"I feel as if I'd like to kill her. Did you see that picture in the *Morning Mirror?* And that paragraph in the *Mail?* It's horrible, Mossop, horrible. And first and last her education's cost me every penny of three thousand pound."

Mr. Mossop nodded appreciatively; then, sympathetically, he lifted the lid of a silver box on a charming walnut-wood stand and asked his visitor to have a cigar.

"No, I never smoke before my dinner," said Josiah sternly. "She hasn't been home a month from Germany." The veins in his forehead grew even more distended.

"Where—in Germany?"

"Eight months at Dresden. Pity she didn't stop there. Fact o' the matter is she's over-educated."

The lawyer looked a little dubious.

"Oh, yes, Mossop. Not having a boy, I don't mind tellin' you I've been a bit too ambitious for that gel. And over-education is what this country is suffering from at the present time. It's the national disease. And women take it worse than men. School—college

—Paris—and Germany on the top of 'em. I must have been mad. However . . . there it is! . . . let me know when the document's ready and I'll look in at the office and sign it."

The lawyer would have liked to continue his protest but the face of his client forbade. He crossed to his writing table, took up a pencil and a sheet of notepaper and said, "Miss Sarah's portion to Mrs. Cockburn except——"

"Five thousand pounds to Gertrude Preston."

The lawyer made a brief note. "Right," he said gravely. "I hope a codicil will be sufficient; we'll avoid a new instrument, if we can. You shall know when it's ready."

Josiah gave a curt nod.

"Going to be war in Europe, do you think?" said the solicitor in a lighter, more conversational tone. It was merely to relieve the tension; somehow the atmosphere of the room was heavy and electric.

"Don't know," said Josiah. "But I'll not be surprised if there is—and a big one."

Mr. Mossop showed a courteous surprise. This question of a coming big war was a perennial subject for discussion in social and business circles. It had been for years and it had now come to rank in his mind as purely academic. He could not bring himself to believe in "the big burst up" that to some astute minds had long seemed inevitable.

"Any particular reason for thinking so just now?"

To the lawyer it was hardly a live issue; somehow it was against all his habits of thought; but it was an act of charity at this moment to direct the mind of his client.

"Stands to reason," Josiah spoke with his usual decision. "Germany's got thousands of millions locked up in her army. She'll soon be looking for some return in the way of dividends."

"But one might say the same of us and our navy."

"That's our insurance."

"That's how they speak of their army, don't they? —with Russia one side of them, France the other."

"I daresay, but"—there was a pause which, brief as it was, seemed to confer upon Mr. Munt an air of profound wisdom—"mark my words, Mossop, they're not piling up all these armaments for nothing. It's not their way."

"But they are so prosperous," said the lawyer. "They are hardly likely to risk the loss of their foreign markets."

"Nothing venture, nothing win. And they do say the German workingman is waking up and that he is asking for a share in the government."

"One hears all sorts of rumors, but in these matters one likes to be an optimist."

"I daresay," Josiah looked very dour. "But I'll tell you this. I'm main glad I got out of all my Continental investments a year last March."

The solicitor had to own that that was a matter in

which his client had shown uncommon foresight. The present state of the market was a remarkable vindication of his sagacity.

There was another little pause in which the solicitor, himself an able man of business, could not help reflecting upon the native shrewdness of this client so keen, so hardheaded, so self-willed. And then it was broken by Mr. Munt taking a step towards the door and saying, "When are you and the wife and daughter coming to see us, Mossop? Come to a meal one evening, won't you?"

The invitation was point blank; but behind the lawyer's genial courtesy was the trained fencer, the ready-witted man of the world. "Most kind of you," he said heartily. "Only too delighted, but, unfortunately, my womenfolk are going up to Scotland to-morrow"—he gave private thanks to Allah that it was so!—"and I follow on Saturday, so perhaps if we may leave it till our return"—The solicitor raised his frank and ready smile to the stern eyes.

"Quite so, Mossop!" The client frowned a little. "Leave it open. But I'd like you to see the house. And Mrs. M. would like to know your wife and daughter."

"They'll like to know her, I'm sure." The air of sincerity was balm. "But they've been so busy gadding about just lately"—the laugh was charming —"that they've had to neglect their social duties."

Josiah was far too elemental to feel slighted, even

if the lawyer had not been so disarming. "But you people here on The Rise have the name of being a stuck-up lot, especially some of you old standards. And I'm bound to say, Mossop, my experience is that you seem to live up to it."

Lawyer Mossop laughed his soft rich note as he followed Mr. Munt across the hall. He opened the front door for his client, and then, hatless as he was, accompanied the visitor down the short drive as far as the gate.

"Nice things here, Mossop," Josiah pointed to the flower beds on either side. "That a Charlotte Fanning?" A finger indicated a glorious white rose whose dazzling purity of color stood out beyond all the rest.

Mr. Mossop said it was a Charlotte Fanning.

"Not sure you are going to beat mine, though."

Mr. Mossop said modestly that he did not expect to do that. Mr. Munt had long been famous for his roses; and by comparison the lawyer declared he was but a novice. The client was flattered considerably by the compliment.

At the gate, the proprietor of the Duke of Wellington pointed to the distant gables of Strathfieldsaye, and said, "Well, come round when you get back. The garden won't be much of a show for twelve months yet, but the house is first class. I designed it myself."

With the winning charm which even Josiah, who felt that he paid for it on the High Court scale could

not resist, Mr. Mossop promised that he would come round when he got back.

"An' don't forget the wife and daughter."

The wife and daughter should come round too. And then as the lord of Strathfieldsaye said, "Good-night, Mossop," and was about to turn away from the open gate, he felt suddenly the hand of the solicitor upon his shoulder and the impact of a pair of grave, kind eyes. "I wish, my dear friend," said Lawyer Mossop, "you could see your way to taking a fortnight to think over that little matter."

It was not mere conventional man-of-the-worldly good feeling. It was the human father, and the sheer unexpectedness of the obtrusion through the highly polished surface of the city's foremost solicitor caused his client to take a sharp breath. But Josiah's strength had always been that he knew his own mind. And he knew it now. "No, Mossop." A final shake of the dour head. "That gel is comin' out of my will. Good-night."

The solicitor sighed gently and closed the gate. And then he stood a moment to watch the slow-receding lurch of the elephantine figure up the road.

VII

IF that boy had lived—which he didn't," reflected the lord of Strathfieldsaye as he opened carefully the fresh painted gate of his own demesne, "I'd like him to have been educated at Rugby."

Lawyer Mossop had been educated at Rugby. Somehow that gentleman always left in the mind of this shrewd, oddly perceptive client an impression of being "just right," of not having anything in excess. His reputation in Blackhampton was very high. Just as Dr. Perrin had been for years its leading physician, Mr. Mossop had been for years its leading lawyer. To be a patient of the one, a client of the other, almost conferred a diploma of merit. Not only was it a proof in itself of social standing, an ability "to pay for the best," but it also expressed a knowledge, greatly valued by the elect, that the best was worth paying for. Josiah was a firm believer in that maxim.

Still . . . he closed the gate of Strathfieldsaye as carefully as he had opened it . . . when all was said education was dangerous. Up to a point a good thing, no doubt. You couldn't be a Lawyer Mossop without it. But it was like vaccination: some people it suited, others it didn't.

There was a trim slight figure coming down the path, in a hat not without pretensions to fashion.

"Leaving us, Gert?" said Josiah. "Better stop to supper."

Miss Preston reluctantly declined the invitation.

"Why not? Always a knife and fork for you here, you know."

"I'd love to, Josiah, but they'll be waiting for me at home."

"Well, if you won't, you won't—but you'd be very welcome." And then he embraced the house and its surroundings in a large gesture. "One better than Waterloo Villa, eh?"

"It is," said Gerty, with tempered enthusiasm. She looked at her brother-in-law with wary eyes. "You must be a very rich man, Josiah."

He narrowed his gaze a little and scratched his cheek delicately with the side of his forefinger, an odd trick he had when thinking deeply on questions of money. "So, so," he said. "So, so."

"But a place like this means *heaps* of money," Gerty waved a knowledgable parasol.

"I daresay." It was the air of a very "substantial" man indeed. "The year after next I expect to be mayor. And then"—a note of triumph crept into his voice—"we may be able to show some of 'em a thing or two."

Miss Preston was diplomatically quite sure of that. And yet as she stood with the crude bulk of Strath-

fieldsaye behind her, she looked somehow a little dubious. It was as if, respect this brother-in-law of hers as she might, she had certain mental reservations in regard to him.

He was too busy with his own thoughts to detect what was passing in her mind; besides the curves of his own mind were too large for him to care very much even had he done so.

"You've got to come to the show, Gert," he said abruptly. "To-morrow week—don't forget."

Gerty began to hedge a bit, but he would take no denial. It was her duty "to bring Maria up to the scratch."

There was no way out, it seemed, so finally she must make up her mind to yield and to suffer. It would be a horrible affair—common people, brass band, a general atmosphere of vulgarity and alcohol; it would be all that her prim soul abhorred. And the heat would be terrific. Her spirit quailed, but how could the miserable Maria hope to get through without her to lean upon! Besides if she showed the white feather Josiah might lose some of his respect for her. And she couldn't afford that, especially after it had cost her so much for him to gain it.

"She must get into the habit of showing herself to the public as she's going to be mayoress."

Miss Preston quite saw that. She yielded with as much grace as she could muster. Josiah took her down to the gate and told her to mind the paint. And then

as she was about to pass through, her gloved hand was laid upon his arm, almost exactly as Lawyer Mossop's had been, and she said softly and gravely in a voice curiously similar, "Josiah, if I were you, I should not be in a hurry about . . . about Sally."

The grimness of the eyes that met hers would have scared most women, but Gertrude Preston was not one to be frightened easily. There was hesitancy, a slight nervousness, all the same.

Josiah shook his head. "No," he said slowly, "that gel is coming' out o' my will."

The look of him as he stood there with the sun's shadow falling across his heavy face told her that argument would be worse than useless. Rather abruptly she said good-night and marched primly away along the road.

VIII

THE annual Flower Show and Gala in Jubilee Park was in part a serious function, in part a popular festival. But its secondary aspect was undoubtedly predominant.

Jubilee Park was sacred to those who thronged the close-packed southern and eastern areas of the city. Among many other things, held by the people of Blackhampton to be vastly more important, the town and its suburbs had a reputation for flowers. It was odd that it should have. Except perhaps a subtle quality in the soil, there was little in its corporate life or in its physical expression to account for the fact that it had long been famous for its roses. Among the hundreds of allotment holders on the outskirts of the city, practical rose-growers abounded and these claimed an apotheosis at the annual show in Jubilee Park.

Almost the only vanity Mr. Josiah Munt had permitted himself in his earlier days was that he was a practical rose-grower. He had competed at the show ever since there had been a show, and he had garnered so many prizes in the process that he now took rank as an expert. But he was more than that. He was now regarded as chief patron of a cult that was

largely confined to the humbler and the poorer classes. A hard man, known throughout the city as very "near" in his business dealings, he was a despiser of public opinion and no seeker of popular applause. But of late years, having grown remarkably prosperous and a figure of ever-increasing consequence in the town, he made a practice just once in the year of "letting himself out a bit" at the function in Jubilee Park.

For one thing the Park itself was almost within a stone's throw of the Duke of Wellington; and in Josiah's opinion its sole merit was its contiguity to that famous public house. Personally he despised Jubilee Park and the class of persons who frequented it—they were a common lot—but now he had taken rank as the great man of this particular neighborhood, wherein he had been born and had sown the seeds of his fortune, it did him no harm in his own esteem or in that of the people who had known him in humbler days, once a year to savor his preëminence.

Tuesday, August the Fourth, was one of the hottest days within the memory of Blackhampton. And in that low-lying, over-populated area of which Jubilee Park was the center it seemed hotter than anywhere else. Being the day after Bank Holiday, a large section of the community "had taken another day off," therefore several thousand persons of all ages and both sexes assembled on the brown bare grass in the course of the afternoon.

To say that the bulk of these had been attracted

to those shadeless precincts by a display of roses would be too polite a compliment. The Blackhampton Prize Brass Band was the undoubted magnet of the many. Then there were tea al fresco for the ladies, a baby show and a beauty competition, beer and bowls for the gentlemen, dancing to follow and also fireworks. When the Show was considered in all its aspects, the roses only appealed to a small minority; the roses in fact were hardly more than a pretext for a local saturnalia, but in the middle of the sward was a large tent wherein the competing blooms were displayed. Close by was a tent considerably less in size if intrinsically the more imposing, to which a square piece of cardboard was attached by a blue ribbon. It bore the legend "President and Committee."

At the entrance to this smaller tent a number of important looking but perspiring gentlemen were seated in a semicircle on garden chairs. And in the center of these, with rather the air of Jupiter among his satellites, was Mr. Josiah Munt. Several members of the committee, all badged and rosetted as they were, had removed their coats out of deference to the thermometer, but the President was not of these. Under the famous white pot hat, which in the south-eastern district of his native city was as famous as the Gladstone collar and the Chamberlain eyeglass, was artfully disposed a cool cabbage leaf, and over all was a large white sun umbrella.

The sun umbrella marked a precedent. It was a

symbol, a herald of the President's ever advancing social status. All the same it was not allowed to mar a certain large geniality with which he always bore himself at the Rose Show. By nature the proprietor of the Duke of Wellington was not an expansive man, particularly in the world of affairs, but once a year, at least, he made a point of unbending as far as it was in him to do so.

This afternoon the President was accessible to all and sundry as of yore. Moreover he had followed his time-honored custom of regaling the committee, most of whom were "substantial men" and the cronies of an earlier, more primitive phase in the ascending fortunes of the future mayor of the city, with whisky and cigars, conveyed specially from the Duke of Wellington by George the head barman. But it was clear as the afternoon advanced and the heat increased with the evergrowing throng, that the subject of roses and even the martial strains of Rule Britannia, Hearts of Oak and other accepted masterpieces rendered with amazing *brio* by the B.P.B.B. did not wholly occupy the thoughts of these distinguished men.

Among the Olympians who sat in the magic semicircle at the mouth of their own private tent and enjoyed the President's whisky and cigars and the privilege of personal intercourse with him was a foxy-looking man with large ears and large spectacles. Julius Weiss by name, he had migrated from his native Germany thirty years before, and by specializing in what

was technically known as "a threepenny hair-cut" had risen to the position of a master hair-dresser with six shops of his own in the city. A man of keen intelligence and cosmopolitan outlook, there were times in the course of the afternoon when he seemed to claim more of the President's attention than the ostensible business in hand.

"No, I don't trust our gov'ment," said Josiah for the tenth time, when a cornet solo, the Battle of Prague ("Bandsman Rosher") had been brought to a triumphant close. "Never have trusted 'em if it comes to that."

"That's because you're a blooming Tory," ventured the only hungry looking member of an extremely well-nourished looking committee—an obvious intellectual with piercing black eyes and fiercely picturesque mustache whose hue was as the raven.

"Politics is barred, Lewis!" It was the President's Saturday morning manner at the City Hall, but its austerity was tactfully mitigated by a dexterous passing of the cigar box. "We ought to go in now . . . this minute. What do you say, Weiss?"

The master hair-dresser screwed up a pair of vulpine eyes and then replied in a low harsh guttural, "It is a big t'ing to fight Chermany."

"We are not afraid of you," interjected a pugnacious Committee-man. "Don't you think that."

The President held up a stern finger. "No, no, Jennings." It was a breach of taste and the Presi-

dent glared at the offender from under his cabbage leaf. He had a deep instinct for fair play, a curious impartiality that enabled him to see the merits of Weiss as a taxpayer and a citizen. In the lump he approved of Germans as little as any one else, but such a man as Weiss with his unceasing industry, his organizing capacity, his business ability and his social qualities was a real asset to the city.

The little hair-dresser broke a solemn pause. *"We* are not ready for war." He stressed the "we" to the plain annoyance of several committee-men, although Josiah was not of the number. "A month from now they'll be in Paris."

"I don't think," said the truculent Jennings.

"You'll see, my tear," said Julius Weiss.

IX

AT five o'clock Maria and Aunt Gerty arrived on the scene. Blackhampton's future mayoress had been taken very firmly in hand by her step-sister who was fully determined that the social credit of Alderman Munt should not be lowered in the sight of the world. Gerty had really taken enormous pains with a naturally timid and weakly constituted member of society.

After a battle royal, in which tears had been shed, the hapless Maria had been compelled to renounce a pair of old-fashioned stays which on common occasions foreshortened her figure to the verge of the grotesque, in favor of sinuous, long-lined, straight-fronted corsets. With such ruthless art had outlying and overlapping portions of Maria been folded away within their fashionable confines, that, as she breathlessly remarked to her torturer as she looked in the glass, "She didn't know herself, she didn't really."

Maria could hardly breathe as she waddled across the parched expanse of Jubilee Park. She was more miserably self-conscious than she had ever been in the whole course of a miserably self-conscious existence. Her corsets, she was sure, filled the world's eye. At her time of life to take such liberties with

the human form was hardly decent, it wasn't really. Moreover Gerty had perched a great hat on the top of her, almost a flower show in itself, the sort that was worn, Gerty assured her, by the local duchess on public occasions; and it was kept in place on a miraculous new fangled coiffure by a white veil with black spots. Then her comfortable elastic-sided boots, the stand-bys of a fairly long and very honorable life, had gone by the board at the instance of the ruthless Gerty. She had to submit to patent leathered, buckled affairs, that could only be coaxed on to the human foot by a shoehorn. No wonder that Mrs. Alderman Munt walked with great delicacy across the baking expanse of Jubilee Park. And the intensely respectable black kid gloves that for more than half a century had served her so well for chapel goings, prayer meetings, weddings, funerals, christenings and the concerts of the Philharmonic Society had been forced to yield to a pair whose virgin whiteness in Maria's opinion carried fashion to the verge of immodesty. Nor did even these complete the catalogue of Gerty's encroachments. There was also a long-handled black and white parasol.

As Maria and Gerty debouched across the grass, Josiah arose from his chair in the midst of the committee and strutted impressively past the bandstand to receive them.

"Why, Mother, I hardly knew you." There was high approval in the greeting. "Up to the knocker,

what!" He offered a cordial hand to his heroically beaming sister-in-law, "How are you, Gert?"

The ladies had been careful to have tea before they came but this precaution did not avail. Josiah insisted on their going into the special tent labeled "Refreshments." Here they had to sit on a form rickety and uncomfortably narrow which promised at any moment either to lay them prone beneath the tea urn or enable them to form a parabola over against the patent bread-cutter at the other end of the table.

The tea was lukewarm and undrinkable, the bread and butter was thick and so uninviting that both ladies were sure it was margarine, but after a moment's hesitation in which she felt the stern eye of Josiah upon her, the heroic Gerty dexterously removed one white glove and came to grips with a plate of buttered buns. In the buns were undeniable currants, and their genial presence enabled Gerty to make a spirited bluff at consuming them.

Where Gerty walked, Maria must not fear to tread. The ladies got somehow through their second tea and then they were haled into the open, past the bandstand and through the crowd surrounding it, to the large tent containing the exhibits. Here, in a select corner, draped with festoons of red cloth, were the prizes which Maria, half an hour hence, would be called upon to distribute with her own white-gloved hands to the victorious competitors.

The heat in the tent being unbearable the Presi-

dent's party had it to themselves. Therefore Maria's audible groan at the sight of the task before her was heard by none save her lord.

"Bear up, Mother," Josiah's tone was a highly judicious blend of sternness, banter and persuasion. "It's not as if you had to make a speech, you know. And if you did have there's nobody here who'd bite you. I'd see to that."

This was encouraging, yet certain gyrations of the black and white parasol betrayed to the lynx-eyed Gerty the sinister presence of stage fright. "Maria," said the inexorable monitress, "you must show Spirit. Hold your sunshade as I've shown you. Keep your chin up. And try to smile."

This counsel of perfection was, at the moment, clearly beyond Maria. But the President's nod approved it, and Gerty, one of those powerful spirits that loves to do with public affairs, proceeded on a flute-like note, "Dear me, what lovely prizes!"

It was hyperbole to speak of the prizes as lovely, but it was, of course, the correct thing to say, and in the ear of Josiah the correct thing was said in the correct way. It would have been difficult for the duchess herself to have bettered that pure note of lofty enthusiasm.

"Not so bad, Gert, are they? What do you think o' that little vawse? Presented by Coppin, the jeweler."

To assess the gift of Coppin, the jeweler, it was

necessary for Miss Preston to bring into action her famous tortoiseshell folders. She had no need for glasses at all. But Lawyer Mossop's aunt, the late Miss Selina Gregg, had aroused in her a passion for their use on appropriate occasions. "A ducky little vahse!" That vexed word was pronounced after the manner of the late Miss Gregg, from whose practice there was no appeal.

"Not so bad—for Coppin. Better anyway than his silver-plated eggstand last year."

Gerty made an admiring survey of the bounty of the patrons of the Blackhampton Rose Growers' Association. "And here, I see, is the President's special prize." She had kept in reserve her appreciation of this *chef d'œuvre* of public munificence, a much beribboned silver gilt goblet to which a card was attached, "President's Special Prize for Rose of Purest Color. Donor Alderman Munt J.P." It was the first thing her eye had lit on, but she had worked up to it slowly, via the lesser gifts of lesser men, so that anything in the nature of anticlimax might be avoided.

"Josiah, tell me, who is the fortunate winner?" The archness of the tone verged upon coquetry.

"Look and see, my gel." The response was unexpectedly gruff. But, as soon as Gerty had looked and seen, the reason for the President's austerity grew clear. On a second card, smaller but beribboned like the first, was inscribed in a fair clerkly hand, "Presented to Mr. W. Hollis for Exhibit 16."

X

HAD a pin fallen in the tent at that moment, any one of those three people might have expected to hear it do so. Gerty was too wise to ask why the husband of the outcast Melia had come to enjoy the special gift of his father-in-law; Maria simply dare not. In truth it was an odd story. Josiah did his best to put a gloss on an incredible fact of which he was rather ashamed; it looked so much like moral weakness, a public giving in; but, as he informed Gerty with a half apologetic air, Jannock was Jannock. In other words, fair play in the eyes of honest men was a jewel.

There could be no question that, in point of color, the fairest bloom sent in was Exhibit Sixteen. It was a rose of such a dazzling snowy whiteness that it had caught and held the expert eye of the President at the morning inspection. "An easy winner, Jennings," he had said, as soon as he had seen it, "Nothing to put beside it, my boy."

The astute Jennings, a professional nurseryman along The Rise, made no comment. He had taken the trouble to find out the name of the grower before bringing a mature judgment to bear on the fruits of his craft. "Sound" criticism is always a priori. Crit-

ics who value their reputation are careful not to pronounce an opinion on any work of art until they know who has produced it. Otherwise mistakes are apt to occur. None knew better than Jennings that the grower of Exhibit Sixteen could not hope to receive the President's prize; indeed Jennings was amazed at the little tick's impudence in daring to compete at all for his father-in-law's silver gilt goblet. It was an act of bravado. Jennings, therefore, shook his head coldly. He declined to show enthusiasm in the presence of what to the unsuspecting eye of the President was an almost too obvious masterpiece.

"All over a winner, Jennings, that is."

Jennings shook the sober head of a professional expert. "To me," he said, "Twenty-one 'as more quality."

"Rubbish, man!" The President threw up his head sharply, a favorite trick when goaded by contradiction. "Twenty-one can't be mentioned on the same day o' the week. What do you say, Penney?"

Before Mr. Councilor Penney, an acknowledged light of the a priori school of criticism, ventured to express an opinion he winged a glance at Nurseryman Jennings. And that glance, in the technical language of experts, conveyed a clear request for "the office."

"The office" was given sotto voce behind the adroit hand of Jennings, "Mester Munt—Twenty-one, Sixteen—Bill Hollis."

Thereupon Mr. Councilor Penney closed one eye

and proceeded to examine the competing blooms. "Well, Mester Munt," he said solemnly, "I am bound to say, to my mind Twenty-one 'as it."

The impetuous president had a short way with the Councilor Penneys of the earth. "Have you no eyes, man! Twenty-one can't live beside Sixteen. Not the same class. Look at the color—look at the shape—look at the size——"

It was realized now that it had become necessary to warn the President. And the situation must be grappled with at once. The deeper the President floundered, the more perilous the job of extrication. Rescue was a man's work, but finally in response to a mute appeal from the pusillanimous Jennings, Mr. Councilor Penney took his courage in his hands. "Mr. Munt," he said warily, "don't you know that Twenty-one was sent in by Joe Mellers, your own gardener?"

It was the best that Mr. Councilor Penney could muster in the way of tact. But at all times a very great deal of tact was needed to handle the President. Clearly the shot was not a lucky one. "Nowt to do with it, Penney." The great man nearly bit off his head. "Ought to know that. Sixteen's the best bloom on the bench."

"Sixteen's that Hollis!" It was an act of pure valor on the part of Mr. Councilor Penney. Nurseryman Jennings held his breath.

"That Hollis!" The President repeated the words calmly. For a moment it was not certain that human

dignity could accept their implication. But there was a world of meaning in the nervous frown of Mr. Councilor Penney, in the tense furtiveness of Nurseryman Jennings.

Was it possible? . . . Was it possible that the little skunk had dared? . . . Had dared to compete at this show of all shows? . . . Had dared to win honestly that prize of all prizes? . . .

The story of Bill Hollis and Melia Munt was a commonplace with every member of the Committee. They were familiar with all the circumstances; and though there might be those among them who felt privately that their august President carried family pride rather far, even these could not help admiring the rigidity of his attitude. It meant enormous strength of character; and character in the shrine at which the true Briton worships. But now that the Committee was up against the problem Bill Hollis had raised they keenly regretted that they had not taken steps to disqualify him from the outset, or had not apprised the President beforehand of the state of the case.

The pause that followed was rather irksome for all parties. It was ended at last by Nurseryman Jennings. That practical expert, having enjoyed an afternoon of free whisky at the President's expense, was now able to clothe his judgment becomingly. "Don't suppose the little Snot grew it hisself!" said Jennings.

Half the Committee saw at once that a way out had

been found for the President. But the President was not of the number. "Why don't you?" he said curtly.

The practical expert was hardly prepared with reasons. Why should he be? His doubts were inspired by the purest altruism. "Why don't you, Jennings?" repeated the President.

Really there is no helping some people!

"Because I don't!" It was rather lame, but Jennings was doing his best in extremely trying circumstances.

The longer, tenser pause that followed none was stout enough to break. Up to a hundred might have been counted before the President said, slowly and gruffly, as a large and shaggy bear endowed with a few limited human vocables might have done, "Have the goodness, Jennings, to mark Exhibit Sixteen for the President's Special."

XI

THUS it was, that among the successful competitors who lined up by the bandstand at six o'clock to receive awards of merit from the fair hands of Mrs. Alderman Munt, was her son-in-law Mr. William Hollis.

Wonders never cease to happen in a world of wonders. When in a moment of sheer bravado Bill Hollis had paid the necessary shilling and had entered the choicest bloom in his garden for the Annual Show he would have staked his davy that he stood about as much chance of walking off with the Special Prize as he did of going to heaven in a golden chariot. The Old Un himself would see to that.

Taken on its merits, this pure white rose that had come as the crown of many years of loving labor would be hard to beat. But, as Bill Hollis knew, things are not taken on their merits by the a priori school of criticism. He knew that its judgments are conditioned by many things and that intrinsic worth is apt to weigh least in the scale. He had shown his bloom in pride and defiance; he had not expected to get anything by it; and now that the despised Committee had acted better than itself he was inclined to regret that it had not lived up to its reputation.

The table containing the prizes had been carried out on to the grass. Beside it stood Mrs. Alderman Munt, white-gloved and anxious, her eyes not unlike those of a frightened rabbit. And yet lurking somewhere in the folds of a rather redundant frame was a certain dignity, as there is bound to be in one who has given four children to the state; in one, moreover, who has accompanied such a mate as Josiah step by step in his steady rise to wealth and power. Beside Mrs. Munt stood the secretary of the society, an important pince-nezed gentleman, with a scroll in his hand bearing the names of the prize winners; immediately behind these, on a row of chairs, were various notabilities, among whom Alderman Munt was conspicuously foremost; and then facing them, in a curious, rather impressed semicircle, were the members of that general public which not for worlds would miss anything in the nature of a giving of prizes by the wife of a real live alderman.

The proprietor of the Duke of Wellington sat glaring fiercely from under his white billycock hat, clutching a little convulsively the knob of his sun umbrella. A ruthless eye raked the distant corps of successful competitors, as one by one they came round the corner of the bandstand and converged upon the timid lady whose task it was publicly to reward their skill. All were awkward, some were abashed, some tried to hide their feelings by an ill-timed facetiousness.

There he was, the little dog! Josiah's grip tightened on the knob of the sun umbrella. If the little cur had "had a drop," as he most probably had, he was very likely to insult Maria—it was such a great, such a golden, opportunity. Josiah was not troubled as a rule by vain regrets, but as the Secretary in his far flung voice announced, "President's Special Prize for best Single Bloom, winner Mr. W. Hollis," and there came an expectant hush in which the meager form of Mr. W. Hollis emerged into the full glare of the public gaze, his father-in-law would have paid a substantial sum to be able to rescind his recent verdict. The little Stoat could not be expected to bear himself like a gentleman.

Aunt Gerty, standing prim and tense at the back of the invertebrate Maria, grew as white as if she had seen a ghost. But she drew in her thin lips sternly and, great warrior as she was, literally transfixed poor Melia's declassé husband with her tortoiseshell folders. How common he was! It was really very stupid of Josiah to let him have a prize in such circumstances. It was very stupid, indeed! He was just the kind of man who might be tempted to indulge in some form of cheap revenge.

As Melia's husband shuffled across the grass Josiah held himself ready to spring upon him. Public or no public he would certainly do so if the little beast made any sign of insulting Maria. But as Bill Hollis came slowly and doggedly into the picture he was visited

by a reluctant grace. Half way across the grass, midway between the bandstand and the alderman's lady, he took his shabby hands from his shabby pockets; a little farther on several degrees of slouch passed from the unpleasing curve of his narrow shoulders. And finally, as the silver gilt goblet was bestowed upon him by a pair of trembling hands, he ducked solemnly, the best he could do in the way of a bow, and then retired modestly, silently, respectfully, the trophy under his arm.

Josiah and Aunt Gerty breathed again. Great was their relief. And so intensely had they been preoccupied with the bearing of Melia's husband, that, very luckily for Maria, they were not able to notice hers. It was well this was so. For the alderman's lady had disgraced herself on an important public occasion by allowing her eyes to fill with tears.

XII

BILL'S first thought was to take the trophy straight home to his wife. But for various reasons he didn't obey it. Relations had grown very strained between Melia and himself. For months past she had been giving him such a bad time that there was little pleasure to be got out of his home.

He was a bit of an idealist in his way. Sixteen years ago, at any rate, he had begun married life by idealizing his home and Melia. But Melia was not an idealist. She was a decidedly practical person, and, like her father, endowed with much shrewd sense. In a perverse hour she had yielded against her better judgment to the quiet persistency of William Hollis; but almost before she married him she knew it wouldn't answer. In her heart she wanted somebody better. She felt that a daughter of Josiah Munt was entitled to somebody better. And in waiving all her rights as the eldest child of a tyrannical, overbearing father, the least she could ask of the man to whose star she had pinned her faith was that he should prove himself a forcible and successful citizen.

Unhappily Bill had proved to be neither. He was a wordster, a dreamer; there was nothing at the back of his rose-colored ideas. It was not that he was a

vicious man. For such a nature as Melia's it had perhaps been better if he had been. She asked for the positive in man, even positive badness; anything rather than muddling mediocrity, ignoble envy of other men's prosperity and continual whinings against fate.

There were times when Melia was so bored with the inadequacy of this mate of hers that she half hoped to goad him into getting drunk enough to repay some of her insults with a good beating. At least it would have been an event, an excitement. But he was not even a thorough-going drinker; at the best, or the worst, he never drank enough beer to rise to the heroic, as a real man might have done; his deepest potations did not carry him beyond maudlin sentiment or vapid braggadocio, both very galling to a woman of spirit. And now, having realized that there was nothing to hope for, that they were going steadily down a hill at the bottom of which was the gutter—just as her clear-sighted father had predicted from the first —years of resentment had crystallized into a hard and fixed hostility. She had an ever-growing contempt for the spineless fool who was dragging her down in his own ruin.

Bill's instinct was to go home at once with the silver gilt goblet. In spite of all the bitterness the last few years had brought him he still had a wish to please Melia. In spite of a cat and dog existence they were man and wife. They had lived sixteen years together

but he still wished to propitiate her. But hardly had he borne his prize through the throng by the bandstand and begun to steer for the main gate of Jubilee Park than there came a change of mind.

It was one of those sudden, causeless changes of mind that was always overtaking him. He never seemed able to do anything now for the reason that almost before he had decided upon one thing he was overpowered by a desire to do another. He had not reached the park gate before he felt the humiliation of accepting such a prize from such hands; and Melia would probably tell him that he ought to have had more self-respect than to take it—if she thought it worth while to express herself on the subject.

The President's Special Prize would bring no pleasure to Melia. True, there was no need to tell her whence it came. No . . . there was no need! Suddenly the band broke into a hearty strain. Beyond a doubt the atmosphere of Jubilee Park was far more genial than that of Number Five Love Lane. Perhaps he ought to have brought Melia to witness his triumph. One reason was that he had been far from expecting it; another, that he daren't invite her. For many months now she had been careful to keep herself to herself, declining always to be seen with him in public.

There was a vacant seat by the gate, out of the sun and within sound of the gay music. This, after all, was far better than Number Five Love Lane. For a

few brief moments "The Merry Widow" (selection) made him feel happier. It would have been nice for Melia—still it couldn't be helped. He ought to have refused the prize—still he had honestly won it. But only an oversight on the part of the blinking Committee had given it him; he could read that in Josiah's ugly mug and in the face of that stuck-up Gerty Preston—so it was one in the eye for them after all! And what price Ma! Her son-in-law broke into a guffaw of melancholy laughter. The old barrel-bodied image got up like one of the Toffs! And yet . . . how her hands trembled! . . . white gloves on 'em too! . . . and that was a queer look she gave him. The old girl, after all, was the best of a rotten bunch.

"The Merry Widow" crashed to an abrupt finale, and a light went out suddenly, as it so often did, in the heart of Bill Hollis. Again the stern edge of reality pressed upon him from every side, but almost at once it was swept away by a new excitement. And yet the excitement was not so new as it seemed. All the afternoon it had been present, a chorus, a background, thrilling and momentous, to a series of formal proceedings to which it had nothing in common, to which it did not bear the slightest relation, and yet with a power truly sinister to cast a pall over them.

A youth with lungs of brass came through the gate crying the Blackhampton *Evening Star.*

Terrible Fighting in Belgium! Awful German Losses! Great Speech by Sir Edward Grey!

A sharp thrill ran through the veins of Bill Hollis. It was one more lively variation on a theme that had been kindling his senses at short intervals throughout the afternoon. War, a real big war, was coming, had come. Of course to him personally it wouldn't matter, except that it might make life more interesting. Yes, somehow it was bound to do that. Whether it would make it interesting enough for a man like himself to care to go on living, that was another question.

"Here y'are, boy."

The boy came across the grass, handed Bill an *Evening Star* and firmly declined the halfpenny that was offered him.

"Penny, sir."

A penny for a *Star* was unheard of. Even the result of the Derby, the result of the match with Yorkshire, the result of the Cup Final itself could not command a penny. Evidently this war, now that it had come at last, was going to be a Record.

Yes, a Record. All the same he was not going to pay a penny for it. One halfpenny was the legal price of the Blackhampton *Evening Star,* and he told the boy "that if he had any of his sauce he'd have the police of him."

XIII

WILLIAM HOLLIS, having defeated the boy, turned his back to the sun and was assured by the Blackhampton *Star* that he was living in a great moment of the world's history. Germany had, it seemed, until twelve o'clock that evening to decide whether she would take on England. She had taken on France, Russia and Belgium already; a few hours hence, if she wasn't careful, she would have to fight the British Empire.

Even to Bill Hollis, dizzied by the sheer magnitude of the headlines of his favorite journal which actually surpassed those of the Crippen trial, the sinking of the *Titanic* and the late King Edward's visit to Blackhampton, that phrase "the British Empire" was full of magic. Lurking somewhere in a compound of half-baked inefficiencies was the vision of a poet, and at this moment it was queerly responsive to this symbol.

"It's all up with 'em if they take on Us." In strict order of priority that was the first message to flash through the sentient being of Mr. William Hollis to be duly recorded by the central office. Hard upon it came a second message. "They've got a Nerve—them Germans."

In the column for late news were blurred fragments

of the speech of the Foreign Minister in the House of Commons. Intellectually William Hollis was not conspicuously bright, but, as he read the simple words, the nature of the terrible misprision against the human race came home to him and he could only gasp.

He got up presently and moved away from the band. As always the band was very nice, but for some reason or other he didn't want to hear it just now. For a short time he walked about on the brown grass, the President's cup under his arm, wrapped in the *Evening Star*. But he wasn't thinking now of the President, of the cup, of Melia, of the injustice of Fate to a private citizen. His thoughts were centered on a Thing that made all these other things, painfully intimate as they were, of no moment at all. These were but trivial matters, and he was now in the presence of the inconceivable, the stupendous.

Coming back to the throng, perhaps for the latent solace these clusters of fellow beings afforded him, he saw from their blank eyes, their set faces, that his own terrible thoughts were shared more or less by them all. The boy had sold his papers already. Other boys had sold theirs. The whole place was alive with fluttering news sheets, gleaming white and spectral in the sun. Already these people, these stout females in farcical clothes, for the most part trundling queer abortions on the end of a string, and these hard-faced, grasping men who were always overreaching one in trade, were living in a different world. They were

not thinking now of flowers and vegetables, of bands or dancing, although the first couples of juniors had just begun to sway rhythmically to the strains of "Hitchy Koo." Something else had come into their lives.

Passing the tent sacred to the President and Committee, it gave him one more thrill to mark the bearing of the grandees. The famous white hat no longer adorned the head of the President. The great man nursed it upon his fat loud-checked knees. All the reluctant geniality a public function had inspired had passed from his ugly face. Yet in the purview of his son-in-law it looked a little less ugly at that moment than he ever remembered to have seen it. Those fierce eyes were not occupied now with the narrow round of their own affairs, nor with a swelling vision of self-importance. The world was on fire. He was simply a man among his fellow men; and like them he was wondering what ought to be done.

At seven o'clock a vaguely excited but profoundly depressed William Hollis made his way out of Jubilee Park. He turned down Short Hill in the direction of his home. But by the time he had reached the foot of that brief declivity, and was involved in an airless maze of bricks and mortar, the thought of his home grew suddenly intolerable. He needed freedom and space, he needed an atmosphere more congenial. Melia would not understand. Or if she did understand she

would be dumb and just now he simply longed for a little human intercourse.

At the end of Love Lane, a mean and crooked little street debouching from the Mulcaster Road which wound a somber trail to the very heart of the city, he stood a moment gazing at the dingy sign a few doors up on the left, W. Hollis, Fruiterer. The obvious course was to go and deposit the prize he had won on the dresser in the back sitting room, or still better, give it into the personal care of Melia. But instead, he wrapped up the trophy a little more carefully, resettled it under his arm, and then allowed himself to drift slowly with the throng in the direction of the Market Place.

As was usual with him now, his actions were aimless and uncertain. There was no particular reason why he should be going to the Market Place beyond the fact that other people seemed to be going there, as somehow they always did seem to be going there at great moments in the national life. The factories and warehouses who happened to be working that day had disgorged their human cargoes and these under the stimulus of hourly editions of the *Evening Star* were moving slowly and solemnly towards the nodal point.

What the Market Place is to the city as a whole, Waterloo Square is to the teeming, close-packed population of its southeastern area. And at the busiest corner of Waterloo Square, at its confluence with Mulcaster Road, that main artery which leads directly to

the center of all things, is the Duke of Wellington public house. William Hollis, drifting with the tide, felt a sudden, uncontrollable desire to "have one" at this famous landmark of the local life.

The Duke of Wellington was a "free" house and Mr. Josiah Munt had been able to maintain in its integrity the declining art of brewing Blackhampton Old Ale. This had a bite and a sting in it, with which the more diluted beverages of "tied" houses could not compare. At the Duke of Wellington you paid for the best and you got it; therefore it was patronized by all in the neighborhood who knew what was what; it had, moreover, peculiar advantages of tradition and geography which gave it a cachet of its own.

"To have one" at the Duke of Wellington, in the eyes of those who lived near by, was almost on a par with "looking in" at Brooks's or the Carlton. It conferred a kind of diploma of local worth and responsibility. At the same time no form of politics was barred, but the proprietor himself was a staunch conservative and it was very difficult to find a welcome in the bar parlor without sharing that faith.

It could not be said that William Hollis had ever aspired to the good graces of the house. There were obvious reasons why this was the case. For sixteen years he had not passed through its doors; in that long period he had not even entered the humbler part of the premises known as "the vaults," sacred to Tom,

Dick and Harry, where the more substantial patrons of the establishment disdained to set foot.

To-night, however, new and strange forces were at work in Bill. Borne along a tide of cosmic events as far as those fascinating doors he was suddenly and quite irrationally mastered by a desire to go in.

Partly it may have been bravado; certainly it was a daring act to cross that threshold. But Josiah himself, for whose personal prowess his son-in-law had a wholesome respect, was safe at the Show; besides, the proprietor was too great a man these days to visit the house very often. Years ago he had ceased to reside there with his family; and in his steady social ascent he was careful not to emphasize a dubious but extremely lucrative connection with that which regarded in perspective was but a common public house.

The chances were that Bill Hollis would be spared this evening an encounter with his father-in-law and former master. But why he should decide so suddenly to take the risk was hard to say, unless it was the half fantastic reaction of an exceedingly impressionable mind to a crisis almost without a precedent in human experience. By nature a sociable fellow, he had now an intense desire to exchange ideas with responsible, knowledgeable people, with those possessing more light than himself. The Duke of Wellington was the headquarters of such in that part of the city; it was the haunt of the quidnuncs and the well informed; and it may have been for that reason that Bill dived sud-

denly through the swing doors, an act he had not performed for sixteen years, and crossed the dark, cool passage with its highly spiced but not unattractive odors.

It may have been the magnitude of the situation in Europe which had suddenly rendered all private matters ridiculous, or it may have been the talisman under his arm which inspired him with an unwonted hardihood, but instead of turning into the taproom, the first on the left, which would have satisfied the claims of honor and wisdom, he pushed boldly on past the glass-surrounded cubicle of the celebrated but haughty Miss Searson, into the Mecca of the just and the good, sublimely guarded by that peri.

In a kind of dull excitement he entered the famous Bar Parlor. To his surprise, and rather perversely, to his relief, it was empty, except that, behind a counter in a strategical angle that commanded the room as well as the passage, Miss Searson was overwhelmingly present, but absorbed apparently at that moment in crocheting a two-inch lace border to an article of female attire sacred to the pages of the realists.

Nothing seemed to have altered in sixteen years, even to the fly-blown advertisement of Muirhead's Pale Brandy facing the door, and surrounding Miss Searson the double row of brass taps, it had once been a part of his duties to keep clean. And that lady herself, sixteen years had altered her surprisingly lit-

tle, if at all. She was what is known technically as a chemical blonde, a high-bosomed, high-voiced, large-featured, large-earringed lady, with remarkable teeth and an aloofness of manner which might almost be said to enforce respect at the point of the bayonet.

When Miss Searson looked up from her crochet she could hardly believe her eyes. William Hollis, in his former incarnation, had been known to her as Bill the Barman, and she in that distant epoch had been known to him as a Stuck-Up Piece. Unofficially of course. Outwardly everybody paid deference to Miss Searson; even the proprietor himself, if he could be said to pay deference to any human being, had always adopted that attitude to Miss Searson; as for Bill the Barman, he had been hardly more than a worm in her sight. And then had come the Great Romance. It had come like a bolt out of clear sky, knocking a whole world askew as Miss Searson understood it; a whole world of sacred values by which Miss Searson and those within her orbit regulated their lives.

The entrance of Bill Hollis into the bar struck Miss Searson dumb with surprise. In a mind temporarily bewildered sixteen years were as but a single day. This was the first occasion in that long period that the incredible adventurer who had suborned the eldest daughter of his stern master into marrying him had dared to revisit the scene of his crime. To weak minds a great romance, no doubt, but the lady behind the bar had not a weak mind, therefore she was not

in the least romantic. She saw things as they were, she knew what life was. It was very well for such things to happen in the pages of a novel, but in the daily round of humdrum existence they simply didn't answer.

It seemed an age to Miss Searson before William the Incredible girded his courage to the point of ordering a pint of bitter. She drew it in stately silence, handed it across the counter and accepted threepence with superb hauteur.

He drank a little. It was no mean brew; and he felt so much a man for the experienec that he was able to ask Miss Searson what she thought of the news.

"News," said Miss Searson loftily. "News?"

"War with Germany."

"Oh, that!" A Juno-like toss of Miss Searson's coiffure. But there she stopped. War with Germany was none of her business, nor was it going to be her business to be forced into conversation with a character whose standing was so doubtful as the former barman. Miss Searson was not a believer in finesse. Her methods had a brutal simplicity which made them tremendously effective.

However, this evening they were less effective than usual. The world itself was tottering, and a deep, deep chord in the amazing Bill Hollis was responsive to the cataclysm. This evening he was not himself,

he was more than himself; his appearance in the Private Bar was proof of it.

Miss Searson was but a woman, a human female. She meant nothing, she meant less than nothing in this hour of destiny. "Yes, that!" He filled in the pause, after waiting in vain for her to do so. "War with Germany. Do you realize it?" His voice was full of emotion.

But Miss Searson did not intend to be drawn into a discussion of anything so fanciful as war with Germany. She was practical. A sensorious mouth shut like a trap. She regarded Bill with the eye of a codfish.

"D'you realize what it means?"

By an adroit turn of the head towards the farther beer-engine she gave William Hollis the full benefit of a pile of stately back hair. And then she said slowly, as if she were trying to bite off the head of each blunt syllable, "Do *you* realize that the Mester sometimes looks in about this time of a Thursday?"

XIV

A NORMAL Bill Hollis would not have been slow to analyze this speech and to find a lurking insult. But he was not a normal Bill Hollis this evening; it was the last place he was likely to be in if he had been. Therefore he shook his head gently at Miss Searson without submitting her to any more destructive form of criticism. What a fool the woman was, what a common fool not to understand that in the presence of a war with Germany nothing else could possibly matter.

"I don't think I'd stop here—if I was you." Yes, there was a bluntness about Miss Searson which at ordinary times had a unique power of "getting there." But Bill merely smiled at her now. The chrysanthemum-topped fathead! Suddenly he reached the limit of his endurance; he expressed a boundless contempt for her and all her tribe by recourse to a spittoon.

How *could* Melia ever have married him . . . Melia Munt who might have married an architect! . . .

Bill Hollis defensively went on with his bitter. He was consumed with scorn of a person whom he had once respected immensely. She was found out, the shallow fool, fringe and back hair included! When he came to the end of the pint, he paused a moment

in the midst of the pleasant sensations it had inspired and then decided that he would have another, not because he wanted another, but because he felt that it would annoy this Toplofty Crackpot.

The second pint did annoy the T.C., annoyed her obviously; emotionally she was a very obvious lady. But it was odd that Bill Hollis, shaken to the depths by a world catastrophe, should desire a cheap revenge and stoop to gratify it. Perhaps it was a case of multiple personality. There were several Bill Hollises in this moment of destiny.

There was the Bill Hollis who gave the defiant order for another pint of bitter, the Bill Hollis who paid for it with truculent coolness, the Bill Hollis who bore it to the window the better to regard the somber stream of fellow citizens flowing steadily in the direction of the Market Place, the Bill Hollis who took a beer-stained copy of the Blackhampton *Tribune* from a table with a marble top and glanced at the portentous headings of its many columns. And finally there was the Bill Hollis who suddenly heard with a sick thrill that came very near to nausea a footfall heavily familiar and a voice outside in the passage.

Could it be . . . ! Could it be that . . . !

There was a look of obvious triumph on the almost unnaturally fair countenance of Miss Searson. In her grim eyes was "I told you so!"

The ex-barman, in the peril of the moment, glanced hastily around, but the eyes of Miss Searson assured

him that he was a rat and that he was caught in a trap. Moreover they assured him that if ever rat deserved a fate so ignominious, William Hollis was the name of that rodent. And the loathsome animal had time to recall before that voice and those footsteps were able to enter the private bar that sixteen years ago Miss Searson had been the witness of a certain incident. And if her warlike bearing meant anything she was now looking for a repetition, with modern improvements and variations.

Escape was impossible, that was clear. And on the strength of a fact so obvious all the various kinds of Bill Hollises promptly came together and decided to hand over the body politic to the only Bill Hollis who could hope to deal with the crisis. This was the Bill Hollis who had had a pint and a half of his father-in-law's excellent bitter and felt immeasurably the better for it.

As a measure of precaution this Bill Hollis spread wide the *Tribune* and by taking cover behind it greatly reassured his brethren. None of the others would have had the wit to think of that. Even as it was only a pint and a half of a very choice brew enabled the device to be put coolly and quietly into practice.

He had hardly taken cover when Josiah came in. Following close behind were Julius Weiss and Councilor Kersley. It was a tense moment, but these grandees were occupied with a matter more important than

the identity of the man behind the newspaper in the corner by the window.

"Miss Searson!" The tone of the proprietor was like unto that of Jove. "Ring up Strathfieldsaye and tell them I am going to eat at the Club."

Bill Hollis was sensible of a thrill. He was a mere cat in the presence of a king, except that this was a king whom he dare not look at. It was a disgusting feeling yet somehow it was exalting. And this sense of uplift grew when Josiah and his friends disposed themselves augustly at one of the tables with a marble top, and three tankards of an exclusive brew were brought to them and they began to talk.

It was "inner circle talk" and in the ear of William Hollis that lent it piquancy. Really it was what he was there for. The newspapers were unsatisfying. He craved to hear the matter discussed by men of substance, standing, general information, by men of the world. Sitting there behind his paper in the private bar, he felt nearer to the heart of things than he had ever been in his life.

"Is it going to make so much difference?" Councilor Kersley, the eminent retail grocer, asked the question.

"It's going to alter everything, Kersley—you mark me." The tone of Josiah was as final as an act of parliament and Julius Weiss slowly nodded in deep concurrence with it.

"Of course we shall down 'em," said Councilor Kersley.

"Yes, we shall down 'em, but——" Josiah's "but" left a good deal to the imagination.

"Don't be too sure, my friends," said the master-hair-dresser.

"Our Navy'll settle it at the finish," Josiah's growl was that of a very big dog.

Julius Weiss shook his head solemnly but he didn't speak again. An odd, uneasy silence settled on the three of them while they drank their beer. But of a sudden there came a wholly unexpected obtrusion into the conversation.

The man by the window lowered his paper. "We're not going to have a walk over, so don't let us think we are." For a reason he could not have explained had his life depended on it, William Hollis revealed his presence and plunged horse, foot and artillery into the matter in hand.

XV

JOSIAH gave him a look. But it was not the look he might have expected to receive. It was less the look of a vindictive parent and employer than the gesture a Chamberlain might have bestowed on a Jesse Collings or a Gladstone on a John Morley.

"You're right, my lad—not a walk over."

For a few minutes these great men talked on and William Hollis by sheer force of some innate capacity, now first brought to life in the stress of an overwhelming affair, talked with them as an equal. These were proud moments in which the power of vision, the understanding heart seemed to come by their own. The world was on fire, and it the flames were to be brought under control many estimates must be revised, many standards must go by the board. Self-preservation, the primal instinct, was already uppermost. Brains, foresight, mental energy were at a premium now. Any man, no matter who or what he might be, who had it in him to contribute to the common stock was more than welcome to do so. The conflagration had only just begun but a new range of ideas was already rife. Men were no longer taken on trust, institutions no longer accepted at their face value.

But all too soon for William Hollis the proceedings

came to an end. He would have liked to sit there all night, tossing the ball among his peers, listening politely and now and again throwing in a word. Suddenly, however, the door of the private bar opened and a flaming-haired, shirt-sleeved appearance in a green baize apron abruptly thrust in its head. At the sight of the grandees it was thrust out again even more abruptly.

"That George?"

George it was.

"Go out and step that there Bus." In the command of Josiah was all the power of the man of privilege, the almost superhuman authority of a city alderman. Bill Hollis, who had once worn the green apron himself, was thrilled by the recollection that even in his day, when Josiah was first elected to the town council, the public vehicle plying for hire between Jubilee Park and the Market Place was always at the beck and call of Mr. Councilor Munt. Few had a good word for him, but even in those days in that part of the city his word was law.

Josiah rose and his friends rose with him. But as he moved to the door he turned a dour eye upon Bill Hollis. Whole volumes were in it, beyond tongue or pen to utter. To-night even he, in the stress of what was happening to the world in which he had prospered so greatly, was less than himself and also more. An eye of wary truculence pinned the ex-barman to the wainscot while the master of the house uttered his

slow, unwilling growl. "Not a bad bloom ye sent in, my lad."

It was a very big dog to a very little dog, but somehow it told far more than was intended. Almost in spite of himself, the man who on a day had abused the confidence of his master by marrying his eldest daughter was forced to realize that no matter what Josiah Munt might be, he was . . . well, he was Jannock!

XVI

TWENTY minutes later William Hollis, feeling inches taller, and more in harmony with himself than for many a day, went forth to grapple with the situation in Europe.

Half Blackhampton, at least, if its streets meant anything, was bent on a similar errand. From every part of the city, its people were slowly filtering in twos and threes to the Great Market Place, that nodal point of the local life and of the life of the empire. Blackhampton claims to be the exact center of England, speaking geographically, and its position on the map is reflected in its mental outlook. It combines a healthy tolerance for the ways and ideas of places less happily situated with a noble faith in itself. Time and again history has justified that faith; time and again it has chosen the famous town as the scene of a memorable manifestation, as its castle, its churches, its ancient buildings, its streets and monuments bear witness. Here an ill-starred king declared war on his people, here a great poet was born, to give but a single deed and a single name among so much that has passed into history. Many of its sons have shed luster on their birthplace. Here is a street bearing the name of one who revolutionized industry; yonder the humble abode

of the prizefighter who gave his name to one of the most important towns of Australia; over there the obscure conventicle of the plain citizen who founded a world religion; "up yond" the early home of one whose name is a household word on five continents; across the road the public house where a famous athlete has chosen to live in a modest but honored retirement.

Biologists say that all forms of organic life are determined by climate. Blackhampton owed much, no doubt, to its happy situation as the exact center of the Empire, but no city in the kingdom could have lived more consciously in that fact. London was not without importance as places went; the same might be said for New York; but in the eyes of the true Blackhamptonian, after all, these centers of light were comparatively provincial.

This evening the streets of the city were alive with true Blackhamptonians. In the sight of these only Blackhampton mattered. Its attitude was of decisive consequence in this unparalleled crisis. No matter what other places were doing and thinking, Blackhampton itself was fully determined to pull its weight in the boat.

The press of citizens was very great by the time Bill Hollis arrived in the Market Place. In particular, they were gathered in serious groups before the City Hall, the Imperial Club and the offices of the Blackhampton *Tribune,* which continued to emit hourly

editions of the *Evening Star* with fuller accounts of the proceedings in Parliament and the latest telegrams concerning the fighting in Belgium.

The British Cabinet had given Germany until midnight, but Blackhampton had fully made up its mind in the matter by five minutes past nine, which was the precise hour that Mr. William Hollis arrived to bear his part in the local witenagemot. His part was the relatively humble one of standing in front of the Imperial Club and gazing with rather wistful eyes into that brightly tiled and glazed and highly burnished interior as it was momentarily revealed by the entrance of a member.

Even so early in the world's history as five minutes past nine it was known to those privileged sons of the race who had assembled in front of the sandstone and red brick façade of the Blackhampton Imperial Club that Germany "was going to get it in the neck." There must be a limit to all things and Germany had already exceeded it. The Cabinet having unluckily omitted to provide itself with even one Blackhampton man was yet doing its best to keep pace with informed Blackhampton opinion, but events were moving very quickly in front of the Imperial Club. At a quarter past nine Sir Reuben Jope, the chairman of *the* Party, drove up in his electric brougham, a bearded fierce-eyed figure whose broadcloth trousers allied to a prehistoric box hat seemed to make him a cross between a rather aggressive Free Kirk elder and an extraor-

dinarily respectable pirate. At twenty minutes past nine Mr. Whibley, the Club porter, an imposing vision in pale brown, gold braid, and brass buttons, came down the steps and informed a friend on the curb "that the Fleet was fully mobilized."

Other luminaries continued to arrive. It was like the night of a very hotly contested election, except for the fact that every one of the thousands of human beings thronging the Market Place were of one mind. But there was neither boasting nor revelry. This was a sagacious, a keen-bitten, a practical race. A terrible job was on hand, but it was realized already that it would have to be done. The thing had gone too far. There were no demonstrations; on the contrary, a quietude so intense as to seem unnatural gave the measure and the depth of Blackhampton's feeling upon the subject.

Had Bill Hollis used the forty-one years of his life in a way to justify his early ambitions he would have been inside the Club on this historical evening, sitting on red leather and smoking a cigar with the best of them. As it was he had to be content with a foremost place in the ever-growing throng outside the Club portals, from which point of vantage he was able to witness the arrival of many renowned citizens and also to gaze through the famous bow window which abutted on to the Square at the array of notables within. In the intensity of the hour the Club servants had omitted to draw down the blinds.

At ten minutes to ten Mr. Alderman Munt, sustained by roast saddle of mutton and green peas, fruit tart and custard, appeared in the embrasure with a large cigar. Seen from the street he looked a tremendously imposing figure. Even in the midst of the men of light and leading who surrounded him he was a Saul towering among the prophets. Not even his admirers, and in the city of his birth these were singularly few, ventured to call him genial, but there was power, virility, unconscious domination in the far-flung glance that marked the press beyond the Club windows. Somehow there was a bulldog look about him that was extraordinarily British. Somehow he looked a good man in a tight place and a bad one to cross.

Had the question been asked there was not one among that throng of hushed spectators who could have explained his own presence in the Market Place, nor could he have said just what he was doing there. A powerful magnet had drawn the many together into a limited space on an airless evening in August to gaze at one another and to wonder what was going to happen, yet well knowing that nothing could happen as far as that evening was concerned. But in this strange gathering, in the solemn hush that came upon it from time to time, was the visible evidence that the people of Blackhampton were standing together in a supreme moment. Perhaps it gave a feeling of security that each was shoulder to shoulder

with his neighbor in this hour so fateful for themselves, for Blackhampton, for the human race.

Nothing happened, yet everything happened. The throng grew denser inside and outside the Imperial Club, but casual remarks became even less frequent, newsboys ceased to shout, and presently the hour of midnight boomed across the square from the great clock on the Corn Exchange and from many neighboring steeples. Nothing happened. But it was Wednesday, August the fifth. The silent multitude began slowly to disperse. A new phase had opened in history.

It was not until a quarter past one, by which time four-fifths of the crowd had gone away as quietly as it had assembled, that Bill Hollis slowly made his way home to Love Lane. In his hand was the prize he had so unexpectedly gained, wrapped in the *Evening Star,* but somehow the Show and all the other incidents of a crowded, memorable, even glorious day seemed very far off as his boots echoed along the narrow streets. An imaginative man in whom psychic perception was sometimes raised to a high power, he was oppressed by a stealthy sense of disaster. It was as if an earthquake had shaken the world from pole to pole. It was as if all the people in it were a little dizzy with a vibration they could hardly feel which yet had shivered the foundations of society.

XVII

BLACKHAMPTON was in the war from the first moment. Never its custom to do things by halves, this body of clear thinking Britons did its best to rise to the greatest occasion in history. Its best was not enough—nothing human could have been—but as far as it went it was heroic.

In the first days of the disaster none could tell its magnitude. Forces had been set in motion whose colossal displacement was beyond human calculation. Something more than buckets of water are required to cope with a prairie fire, but at first there seemed no other means at hand of dealing with it.

Within the tentative and narrow scope of the machinery provided by the state wonders were performed in the early weeks of the holocaust. Every bucket the country could boast was called into use, but the flames seemed always to gain in power and fury.

From the outset this midland city, like the kingdom itself, betrayed not a sign of panic. In the presence of fathomless danger it remained calm. British nerves lie deep down, and in those first shattering weeks the entire nation stood stolidly to its guns under the threat of night and disruption.

The energy shown by Blackhampton in organizing

hospitals and in raising men to fill them was truly amazing, yet in this it was no more than the mirror of the whole country. City vied with city, shire vied with shire, in voluntary service to a state, that, no matter what its defects, was able to maintain a sense of proportion which may be claimed as the common measure of the republic. The curious anacronism, magniloquently miscalled the British Empire, rose at once to a moral height without a precedent in the history of the world. It would have been fatally easy in the circumstances of the case for a brotherhood of free peoples to have turned a deaf ear to the voice of honor. The mine was sprung so quickly, the issues at stake were so cunningly veiled, that only "a decent and a dauntless people," unprepared as they were and taken by surprise, would have cast themselves into the breach at an hour's notice, fully alive to the nature of the act and by a divine instinct aware of its necessity, yet without fully comprehending what it involved.

Governments and politicians, like books and writers, exist to be criticized, and it is their common misfortune that impudence is now the first function of wisdom. History is not likely to deny the great part played in a supreme moment by certain brave and enlightened men. In the end the mean arts of the party journal will not rob of their need those who have made still possible a decent life.

Within a fortnight of the outbreak arose a crying

need for men. Few, even at that moment, were bold enough to breathe the word "conscription." Britain was a maritime power. Armies on the Continental scale were none of her business. Russia and France bred to European conditions, with a fundamental man power fully equal to that of the Central Empires could be trusted to hold their own. But these fallacies were soon exposed.

Still, even then, the country hesitated to take the plunge. Conscription seemed to many the direct negation of what it had stood for in the past. These still pinned their faith to the system of voluntary levies. The rally of the country's manhood to a cause only indirectly its own was beyond all precedent. Field Marshal Viscount Partington mobilized his very best mop and sent it to deal with the Atlantic. For all that the flood did not subside and it gradually dawned on the public mind that more comprehensive methods might be needed.

In the meantime the Hun was at the gate of Paris. The Channel ports, if not actually in the hands of the enemy, were as good as lost. Belgium was being ground under the heel of a savage conqueror. And in the city of Blackhampton, as elsewhere in Britain, these things made a very deep impression.

Among the many forcible men that a new world phase revealed Blackhampton to possess, none stood out more boldly in those first grim weeks than Josiah Munt. The proprietor of the Duke of Wellington

was a man of peculiar gifts, and it was soon only too clear that not only Blackhampton, but England herself, had need of them. His was the ruthless energy that disdains finesse. It sees what to do, or believes it does—almost as important in life as we know it!—and goes straight ahead and gets it done.

One evening in the middle of September Josiah came home to dinner in a very black mood. It was not often that he yielded to depression. But he had had a hard day on local war committees in the course of which he had been in contact with men nearer to the center of things than he was himself. Moreover, these were men from whom this shrewd son of the midlands was only too ready to learn. They were behind the scenes. Sources of information were open to them which even a Blackhampton alderman might envy; and they were far from echoing the airy optimism of the public press. The fabric of society, stable but elastic, by means of which Josiah himself and so many like him had been able in the course of two or three decades to rise from obscurity to a certain power and dignity was in urgent danger. The whole of the western world was in the melting pot. That which had been could never be again. Cherished institutions were already in the mire. And all this was but the prelude to a tragedy of which none could see the end.

Josiah's mood that evening was heavy. Even the

presence at the meal of his sister-in-law, as a rule a natural tonic, did little to lighten it.

"They won't get Paris now," she affirmed.

"We don't know that." He shook his head with the gesture of a tired man. "Nobody knows it."

"No, I suppose they don't." Miss Preston read in that somber manner the need for mental readjustment. "But the papers say that General Joffre has the situation in hand."

Josiah renounced a plate of mutton broth only half consumed. "Mustn't believe a word you see in the papers, my gel. They don't know much, and half of what they do know they are not allowed to tell." Miss Preston discreetly supposed that it was so. "But things are going better, aren't they?"

"We'll hope they are." Josiah's fierce attack upon the joint in front of him seemed to veto the subject.

The silence that followed was broken by Maria, whose entrance into the conversation was quite unexpected and rather startling. "Did you know," she said, "that Melia's husband has joined the army?"

Josiah suspended operations to poise an interrogatory carving knife. "Who tells you that?" he said frostily.

"The boy from Murrell's, the greengrocer's,"—somehow the infrequent voice of Maria had an odd precision—"said to Alice this morning that he heard that Mr. Hollis had gone for a soldier."

Josiah returned to the joint, content for the time

being with the remark, "that it was a bad lookout for the Germans," a sally that won a timely laugh from his sister-in-law. On the other hand, Maria, who had never been known to laugh at anything in all her anxious days, began to wonder somberly whether Melia would be able to carry on the business.

"From all that I hear," growled Josiah, "there ain't a sight o' business to be carried on."

In the silence which followed Maria gave a sniff that was slightly lachrymose, and then the strategic Gerty after a veiled glance towards the head of the table, ventured on "Poor Amelia."

Josiah was in the act of giving himself what he called "a man's helping" of beans. "She made her own bed," he said in a tone that gained in force by not being forcible, "and now she's got to lie in it."

For the first time in many years, however, Maria seemed to be visited by a spark of spirit. "Well, I think it's credible of that Hollis, very creditable."

Josiah raised a glass of beer to the light with a connoisseur's disparagement of its color, and then he said, "In my opinion he's running away from his creditors. I hear he owes money all round."

"He's going to risk his life, though," ventured Aunt Gerty. "And that's something."

"It is—if he risks it," Josiah reluctantly allowed.

Maria became so tearful that she was unable to continue her dinner.

XVIII

THE next morning, about a quarter to ten, Josiah boarded a Municipal tram at the foot of The Rise, earning in the process the almost groveling respect of its conductor, and paid twopence for a journey to Love Lane. Five doors up on the left was a meager house that had been converted into a greengrocer's shop. By far the most imposing thing about it was a signboard, which, although sadly in need of a coat of paint, boldly displayed the name William Hollis Fruiterer, in white letters on a black ground. For the last sixteen years, whenever the proprietor of the Duke of Wellington had occasion to pass this eyesore which was clearly visible from the busy main thoroughfare that ran by the end of the street, he made it a fixed rule to look the other way. But this morning when he got off the tram car at the corner, he set his teeth, faced the signboard resolutely and walked slowly towards it.

A stately thirty seconds or so of progress brought him to the shop itself. For a moment he stood looking in the window, which was neither more nor less than that of a visibly unprosperous greengrocer in a very small way of business. He then entered a rather

moribund interior, the stock in trade of which consisted in the main of baskets of potatoes and carrots and an array of stale cabbages laid in a row on the counter.

The shop had no one in it, but the first step taken by an infrequent customer across its threshold rang a bell attached to the underside of a loose board in the floor, thereby informing a mysterious entity beyond a glass door draped with a surprisingly clean lace curtain that it was required elsewhere.

The entity did not immediately respond to Josiah's heavy-footed summons. When it did respond it was seen to be that of a thin faced, exceedingly unhappy looking woman of thirty-five whose hair was beginning to turn gray. Her print dress, much worn but scrupulously clean and neat, had its sleeves rolled back beyond the elbows; and this fact and a coarse sackcloth apron implied that she had been interrupted in the task of scrubbing the floor of the back premises.

The interior of the shop was rather dark and Josiah, having taken up a position in its most sunless corner, was not recognized at once by his eldest daughter.

They stood looking at each other, not knowing what to say or how to carry themselves after a complete estrangement of sixteen years. Josiah, however, had taken the initiative; he was a ready witted man of affairs and he had been careful to enter the shop with a formula already prepared to his mind. It might

or might not bridge the gulf, but in any case that did not greatly matter. He had not come out of a desire to make concessions; he was there at the call of duty.

"They tell me your man's joined th' army." That was the formula, but it needed speaking. And when spoken it was, after a moment uncannily tense, it was not as Alderman Munt J.P. had expected and intended to utter it. Instead of being quite impersonal, the tone and the manner were rude and grim. Somehow they had thrown back to an earlier phase of autocratic parenthood.

Melia turned very white. It did not seem possible for her to say anything beyond a defiant "yes." Breathing hard, she stood looking stonily at her father.

"When did he go?"

"Monday." The tone of Melia was queerly like his own.

Josiah rolled the scrub of whisker under his chin between his thumb and forefinger, and then slowly transferred the weight of his ponderous body from one massive foot to the other. "Don't seem to be doing much trade."

"Not much." But the tone of Melia rather implied that it was none of his business even if such was the case.

"Will ye be able to carry on?"

Melia didn't know. Her father didn't either. He was inclined to think not, but without expressing that opinion he stood with narrowed eyes and pursing his

lips somberly. "Where's the books?" he said abruptly.

The desire uppermost in Melia was to tell him in just a few plain words that the books were no concern of his and that she would be much obliged if he would go about his own affairs. But for some reason she was not able to do so. She was no longer afraid of him; years ago she had learned to hate and despise him; but either she was not strong enough, not a big enough character to be openly rude to him, or the subtle feelings of a daughter, long since rejected and forgotten, may have intervened. For after a horrible moment, in which devils flew round in her, she said impassively, "Don't keep none."

"Not books! Don't keep books!" The man of affairs caught up the admission and treated it almost as a young bull in a paddock might have treated a red parasol. "Never heard the like!" He cast a truculent glance round the half denuded shop. "No wonder the jockey has to make compositions with his creditors."

Melia flushed darkly. She would have given much had she been able at that moment to order this father of hers out of the shop, but every minute now seemed to bring him an increasing authority. The Dad, the tyrant and the bully whom she had feared, defied and secretly admired, was now in full possession. At bottom, sixteen years had not changed him and it had not changed her. Had the man for whom she had wrecked her life had something of her father's qual-

ity she might have forgiven his inefficiency, his tragic failure as a human being, or at any rate have been more able to excuse herself for an act which, look at it as one would, was simply unforgivable.

"I don't know what you mean." Her hard voice trembled and then broke harshly—but anger and defiance could not go beyond that. "He paid the quarter's rent before he went. He owes a few pounds but he's going to send me a bit every week until it's paid."

"I suppose you've got a list of his liabilities." Even his voice shook a little, but he treated the scorn, the anger, the hard defiance in her eyes as if they were not there.

Again the paramount desire was to insult this father of hers, had it been humanly possible to do so. But again was she bereft of the power even to make the attempt. "Yes, I have," she said sullenly.

"Let me see it, gel."

For nearly a minute she stood biting her lips and looking at him, while for his part he coolly surveyed the shop in all its miserable inadequacy. She still wanted to order him out. His proprietary air enraged her. Yet she could not repress a sneaking admiration for it and that enraged her even more. But she suddenly gave up fighting and retired in defeat to the mysterious region beyond the curtained door, whence she returned very soon with a piece of paper in her hand.

Josiah impressively put on his gold-rimmed eye-

glasses, a recent addition to his greatness, and examined the paper critically. The amount of William Hollis's indebtedness, declared in hurried, rather illiterate pencil, as if the heart of the writer had not been in his task, came to rather less than twenty pounds.

"This the lot?" He spoke as if he had a perfect right to ask the question.

"It is." Her eyes and her voice contested the right, yet in spite of themselves they admitted it.

"Who owns this here property?" Again the half truculent glance explored every nook and cranny of the meager premises.

"Whatmore the builder."

Josiah rubbed a thick knuckle upon his cheek. "Ah!" That was his only comment. "Owns the row, I suppose?"

Melia supposed he did.

"What rent do you pay?"

"Twenty-five." She resented the question, but the growing magnetism of having again a real live man to deal with was making her clay in his hands.

He took a step to the shop door, the paper still in his hand, and stood an instant looking up the dreary length of narrow street. It was only an instant he stood there, but it was long enough to enable him to make up his mind. Suddenly he swung round on his heel to confront the still astonished and resentful Melia.

"Want more window space," he said. "Casement ought to be lower and larger. Those flowers"—he pointed to a bowl of stocks on the counter—"ought to be where people can look at 'em. But this isn't a neighborhood for flowers. Offer vegetables and fruit at a low price, but more shop room's needed so that folks can see 'em and so that you can buy in bigger quantities. Who is your wholesaler?" He looked down the list. "Coggins, eh? Coggins in the Market Place?"

Melia nodded. Should she tell him that Coggins had that morning refused to supply anything else until the last delivery of potatoes, bananas and tomatoes had been paid for? Pride said no, but a force more elemental than pride had hold of her now.

"Owe him six pound, I see. What does he let you have in the way of credit?"

"He won't let me have anything else until I've paid his account," said the reluctant Melia. "And he says it's all got to be cash for the future."

"When did he say that?"

"He's just been up to see me."

"Can you pay him?"

"I promised him two pounds by Saturday."

Josiah made no comment. Once more his eyes made the tour of the shop. And then he said with the slow grunt that Melia knew so well:

"Very creditable to your man to join up . . . if he sticks it."

The four last little words were almost sinister. And then in the unceremonious way in which he had entered the shop the great man walked out. The place was as distasteful to him as his presence in it was distasteful to his eldest daughter. Yet for both, and in spite of themselves, their meeting after long years had had an extraordinary grim fascination.

XIX

AT Christmas Private Hollis was granted forty-eight hours' leave. He had been a member of the Blackhampton Battalion rather less than three months, but this was a piece of luck for which he felt very grateful.

Those three months had been a grueling time. His age was forty-one, and, in order to comply with the arbitrary limit of thirty-eight imposed by Field Marshal Viscount Partington in the first days of strife, it had been necessary to falsify his age. Many another had done likewise. Questions were not asked, and if a man had physical soundness and the standards of measurement demanded by the noble Viscount there seemed no particular reason why they should be. All the same the sudden and severe change from a soft life found some weak places in Private Hollis.

How he stuck it he hardly knew. Many a time in those trying early weeks he was sorely tempted to go sick with "a pain in his hair." But ever at the back of his mind hovered the august shade of Troop Sergeant Major William Hollis, the distinguished kinsman who had fought at Waterloo, whose spurs and

sword hung in the little back sitting room of Number Five, Love Lane; and that old warrior simply would not countenance any such proceeding. Therefore, Christmas week arrived without Private Hollis having missed a single parade. Although not one of the bright boys of the Battalion, he was not looked upon unfavorably, and on Christmas Eve, about four o'clock, he returned to his home from the neighboring town of Duckingfield.

His home in the course of the sixteen years he had lived in it had brought him precious little in the way of happiness. More than once he had wondered if ever he would be man enough to break its sinister thrall; more than once he had wished to end the ever-growing aversion of man and wife by doing something violent. He had really grown to hate the place. And yet after an absence of less than three months he was returning to it with a thankfulness that was surprising.

All the same he was not sure how Melia would receive him. When at last he had made the great decision and had told her that he was going to join up he had said she must either carry on the business in his absence, or that it could be wound up and she must be content with the separation allowance. Her answer had been a gibe. However, she proposed to carry on in spite of the fact that W. Hollis Fruiterer as a means of livelihood was likely to prove a stone about her neck. Still there was a pretty strong vein

of independence in her and if she could keep afloat by her own exertions she meant to do so.

During his three months' absence in camp their correspondence had been meager; it had also been formal, not to say cold. The estrangement into which they had drifted was so wide that even the step he had recently taken could not bridge it. He had told her on a picture postcard with a view of Duckingfield Parish Church that he was quite well and he hoped that she was and that things were going on all right; and with a view of the Market Place she replied that she was glad to know that he was quite well as it left her at present. However, he was careful to supplement this marital politeness with a few words every Saturday when he sent her five shillings, all he could spare of his pay. The money was always acknowledged briefly and coldly. No clew was given to her feelings, or to her affairs, but when he told her he was coming home at Christmas for two days she wrote to say that she would be pleased to see him.

As he stepped off the tram into the raw Blackhampton mirk which awaited him at the end of Love Lane that formal phrase came rather oddly into his mind. It gave him a sort of consolation to reflect that Melia was one who said what she meant and meant what she said. But, whether or not she would be pleased to see him at the present moment, he was genuinely pleased to be seeing her.

It was strange that it should be so. But Melia with

all her grim humors stood for freedom, a life of physical ease and cushioned independence, and this was what a slack fibered man of one and forty simply longed for after three months' "grueling." For a man past his physical best, of slothful habits and civilian softness, the hard training had not been child's play. Besides, his home meant something. It always had meant something. That was why in the face of many difficulties he had struggled in his spasmodic way to keep it together. It had seemed to give him no pleasure, it had seemed to bring nothing into his life, but somehow he had felt that if once he let go of it, as far as he was concerned it would mean the end of all things. He would simply fall to pieces. He would sink into the gutter and he would never be able to rise again.

Getting off the tram at the end of Love Lane he felt a sensation that was almost pride to think that he had a place of his own to come home to. After all it stood for sixteen years of life and struggle. And at that moment he was particularly glad that he had sent that five shillings a week regularly. Unless he had done so he would not now have been able to go and face Melia.

There was not much light in the little street, but it was not yet quite dark. And the first sight of his home gave him a shock. The outside of the shop had changed completely. Not only was the signboard and the rest of the woodwork resplendent with new paint,

but the window was more than twice the size it had been. Moreover it was brilliantly lighted; there was a fine display of apples, oranges, prunes, nuts, even boxes of candied fruits and bonbons; and in the center of this amazing picture was a large Christmas tree, artfully decorated, in a pot covered with pink paper.

William Hollis gave a gasp. And then a slow chill spread over him as he realized the truth. Somebody had taken over the business, somebody with capital, brains, business experience. But that being the case why had Melia kept it all so dark? And why, if the business belonged to somebody else, was his name still on the signboard? And why had it had that new coat of paint?

The sheer unexpectedness struck him internally, as if a bucket of water had been dashed in his face. It was the worst set-back he had ever had in his life. Not until that moment did he realize how much the shop meant to him. He was bitterly angry that such a trick had been played. It showed, as hardly anything else could have done, the depth of Melia's venom; it showed to what a point she was prepared to carry her resentment.

It took him a minute to pull himself together, and then he walked into the shop, not defiantly, not angrily, but with a sense of outrage. There was nobody in it, but, as he cast round one indignant glance at its new and guilty grandeur and then crossed heavily to

the curtained door, he held himself ready to meet the new proprietor.

Beyond that mysterious portal the small living room was very spick and span. Almost to his surprise he found Melia there. She matched the room in appearance and at the moment he came in she was putting a log of wood on the fire. Great Uncle William's sword and accouterments, hanging from the wall, were decorated with holly, the pictures also and a new grocer's almanac, and a small bunch of mistletoe was suspended from the gas bracket in the middle of the ceiling. Everything was far more cheerful and homelike than he ever remembered to have seen it. The note of Christmas was there, which in itself meant welcome and good cheer.

He stood at the threshold of the curtained door, a neat soldierlike figure with a chastened mustache, looking wonderfully trim and erect in his uniform. She greeted him with a kind of half smile on her hard sad face, but he didn't offer to kiss her. Not for long years had they been on those terms; they were man and wife in hardly more than name. And if in his absence, as there was reason to suspect, she had played him a trick in revenge for her years of disappointment, he somehow felt man enough at that moment to make an end of things altogether so far as she was concerned. There were faults on both sides, no doubt. Perhaps he hadn't quite played jannock; but if the business now belonged to somebody else, he would

simply walk straight out of the place and he would never enter it again.

She stood looking at him, as if she expected him to speak first. But he didn't know what to say to her, with that doubt in his mind. Braced by the stern discipline which he felt already had made him so much more a man than he had ever been in his life, he had come home fully prepared to make a fresh start. In spite of her embittered temper, he had not lost quite all his affection for her. He was the kind of man who craves for affection; absence and hardship had made him realize that. He had looked forward to this homecoming, not merely as a relief from the grind of military routine, which galled him at times so that he could hardly bear it, but as an assertion of the manhood, of the husbandhood, that had long been overdue.

"Evenin', Melia," he said at last.

"Evenin', Bill," as she spoke she dropped her eyes.

"Happy Christmas to you." Somehow his voice sounded much deeper than ever before.

"Same to you, Bill." There was almost a softness in the fall of the words that took his mind a long way back.

"How goes it?" Her reception was thawing him a little in spite of himself, but he hesitated about taking off his overcoat. If this fair seeming was intended to mask a blow there was only one way to meet it. There was a pause and then he took the plunge. "Busi-

ness good?" He held himself ready for the consequences.

"Pretty fair." The tone told nothing.

"Seems to be that," he said mordantly. "Had a coat o' paint, I see, outside." He steeled himself again. "Had a new window put in an' all."

She nodded.

"How did you manage it?" Again the plunge.

"Got a new landlord."

Ha! they were coming to it now. He held himself tensely. "Old Whatmore gone up the spout or something?" He remembered that some time back there had been rumors of an impending bankruptcy on the part of Whatmore the builder.

"No, Whatmore's all right, but he's sold this shop and the whole row with it."

"Sold it, eh?" His excitement was so great that in spite of a cool military air it was impossible to disguise it. All the same she waited for him to ask the all-important question, but he was slow to do so.

"Who's bought it?" he said at last.

"Father's bought it." She did her best to speak quite casually, but she didn't succeed.

XX

IT was a knife. Yet it had not dealt exactly the kind of blow that he had looked for. Even if the stab was softer, and of that at the moment he was not quite sure, undoubtedly there was poison in the wound. In a flash he saw that, somehow, it had strengthened her position and weakened his. "You never told me he'd bought the business." The tone was a confession of impotence.

"He hasn't bought it."

But, in face of the facts, the fine exterior and the large and expensive stock this was a quibble and it was too palpable. "How did you come by all that stuff in the window then?"

"He's helping me to run it."

"Helping you to run it!" His face was a picture of simple incredulity.

"He paid up all we owed so that we could start fair. And he looks in every Monday morning and tells me what to buy and where to buy it."

"Does he pay for it?"

"He does." There was something like pride in her voice. "He pays cash. And I have to keep books—like I used to at the Duke of Wellington. Of course

he's only lending the money. I pay him back at the end of the month when I balance the accounts."

He was dumfounded by this precise statement. The hand of his mean, narrow father-in-law was not recognizable. Somehow it seemed to alter everything, but not at once was he able to turn his mind to the new and unexpected situation.

One thing was clear, however; it would be vain to resent Josiah's interference. He had bought the property over their heads and he could do what he liked with his own. Again Melia had been left in debt and her husband knew well enough that unless some special providence had intervened she might not have been able to carry on. Exactly why Josiah had done as he had done neither his daughter nor his son-in-law could fathom. They hated to receive these belated favors, yet as things were there was no way of escaping them.

A little reluctantly, yet with a feeling of intense relief, Bill took off his good khaki overcoat and hung it on the nail provided for the purpose on the curtained door. Melia toasted a pikelet at the clear fire, buttered it richly, set it in a dish in the fender to keep warm; then the kettle began to boil and she brewed the tea.

As she did all this Bill noticed that there was a new air of alertness, of competence about her; there was a light in her eyes, a decision in her actions; she seemed to have more interest in life. And for himself, as he sat at the table with its clean cloth and shining knives and spoons and bright sugar bowl and she handed him

his tea just as he liked it, with one lump of sugar and not too much milk, he felt something changing in him suddenly. In a way of speaking it was a kind of rebirth.

They didn't talk much. Melia was not a talking sort, nor was he except when he had "had a drop," and he didn't get "drops" now. Besides, in any case, the army seemed to have taken anything superfluous in the way of talk out of him, as it did with most. But he was honestly glad to be back in the peaceful four walls of his home. And it was not certain, although Melia carefully refrained from hinting as much, that she was not honestly glad to see him there. At all events she got his slippers for him presently out of the boot cupboard; and then, unasked, she made a spill of paper for him and laid it on the table by his elbow, a sufficient intimation that he was expected to light his pipe.

XXI

THEY went to bed at a quarter to ten. For a time they talked and then Bill fell asleep. And he slept as perhaps he had never slept in that room in all the years of their married life. How good the old four-poster seemed! It was a family heirloom in which he had been born forty-one and a half years ago. Many a miserable, almost intolerable night had he passed in it, but this Christmas Eve in the course of ten minutes or so it was giving him one of the best sleeps he had ever known.

He woke in pitch darkness. Melia was breathing placidly and regularly by his side. He didn't venture to move lest he should disturb her, and he lay motionless but strangely comfortable; somehow it had never given him such exquisite pleasure to lie in that old bed.

Everything was very still; there was none of the intolerable fuss and clatter of barrack life at all hours of the day and night. It was so peaceful that he was just about to doze again when a distant clock began to strike. It was the familiar clock of Saint George's Church, along Mulcaster Road, a hundred yards or so away, and it told the hour of seven.

Two or three minutes later bells began to ring. It

was Christmas morning; they were proclaiming peace on earth and good will towards men. How rum they sounded! Yet as he lay motionless in that bed, with a slow succession of deeply harmonious breaths near by, he wished harm to no man, not even to the Boche. Peace on earth and good will towards men . . . yes, and women! Then it was, just in that pulse of time, the inspiration came to him to make Christmas morning memorable.

The idea was very simple. He would steal out of bed without harm to the slumbers of Melia, slip on his clothes in the dark, go downstairs, light the kitchen fire, boil the kettle and presently bring her a cup of tea. Never before had it occurred to him to pay her such a delicate attention, but this morning he appeared to have a new mind and a new heart; somehow, this morning he was seeing things with other eyes.

Without disturbing her he was able to carry out his plan. But twenty minutes later when he returned to the room with a cup of tea on a small tray, Melia was awake and wondering what the time was.

"Needn't get up yet," he said. "I've lit the fire. Happy Christmas to you!" Then he handed her the tea.

She seemed much surprised and just for a moment a little embarrassed. But she drank the tea gratefully, yet wondering all the time what had made him bring it to her. Then she announced her intention

of getting up, but he bade her lie quiet as it was Christmas morning and he was well able to cook the breakfast.

Quite a pretty passage of arms developed between them on the subject, but in the end she prevailed in spite of his protests, and came downstairs to deal in person with the vital matter of the bacon and eggs.

Somehow their half playful contention made a good beginning to the day. And, take it altogether, it was quite the best they had ever known in that ill-starred house. There had been times when week had followed week of such hostility that they had hardly exchanged a look or a word, times in fact of soul-destroying antipathy in which they almost loathed the sight of one another. But there was nothing of that now. So much had happened in three short months of separation that there were a hundred things to talk about; both of them seemed to be living in a different world.

Their outlook on life had altered. Everything they did now had a purpose, a meaning; it was not merely a question of getting through a day that had neither reason nor rhyme. He was a soldier in a uniform, he felt and looked a man in it, he stood for something. She was proud, in a way she had never been proud, of having a husband in the army. It was her duty and her privilege to keep his home together against his return to civil life.

Soon after breakfast they were visited by a second inspiration, but this time it came to Melia. Suppose

they attended the eleven o'clock service at Saint George's Church? In their early married life they had gone there together once or twice, but for many years now when Melia went there on Sunday evenings she had invariably been alone.

It may have been a desire to let the neighbors see how well his khaki suited him, or life in the army had aroused an odd craving for religion, or perhaps it was simply a wish to give pleasure to Melia; at any rate Bill fell in with the idea. She had just time to arrange with the lady next door, Mrs. Griggs by name, who had once been a cook in good service, to give an eye to the turkey which was set cooking in the oven, then to put on her best dress, not much of a best, it was true, but to have gone to church in any other would have been unthinkable, to put on her only decent hat and a sorely mended pair of black cotton gloves, and to get there on the stroke of eleven, just as the bells ceased and the choir were moving down to their stalls. Melia, at any rate, had seldom enjoyed a service so much as this one, and her friend the Reverend Mr. Bontine, who called to see her regularly once a quarter, preached the finest sermon she had ever heard in the course of long years of worship.

For all that, it was not certain that Private Hollis was not bored a little by the Reverend Mr. Bontine. He could not help a yawn in the middle of the homily, but this may have been a concession to his length of days as a civilian when "he didn't hold with persons,"

but as Melia was too much absorbed to notice him, her sense of a manly and fruitful discourse was not marred; and she was able to enjoy the same happy oblivion of martial restiveness during the long prayer. Taking one consideration with another Private Hollis may be said to have borne extremely well an ordeal to which he had not submitted for many years; and at the end of the service as he came out of church he grew alive to the fact that in the sight of the congregation he was a person of far more consequence than he had ever been in his life.

More than one pair of eyes, once hostile or aloof, were upon him and also upon Melia. People looked at him as if they would have been only too proud to know him, substantial people like Wilmers, the insurance agent, and Jenkinson the tailor; but the climax came as he stepped on to the flags of Mulcaster Road and no less a man than Mr. Blades, the druggist of Waterloo Square, took off his tall hat to Melia and said, "Happy Christmas to you, Mr. Hollis."

A year ago that was an incident that simply could not have happened. But after all it was just one among many. He was an equal now with the best of his neighbors, no matter what their substance and standing. He was a man who counted. In the Blackhampton Battalion he was merely Private Hollis, and not much of a private at that, as many loud voiced and authoritative people made a point of telling him,

but in civilian circles apparently the outlook was different.

When they turned into Love Lane they were met by further evidence of the new status of W. Hollis Fruiterer. A flaming-haired youth in a green baize apron had been knocking in vain on the shuttered door of the shop. There was a parcel in his hand whose shape was familiar but not on that account the less intriguing.

"Mester Munt's compliments—sir." It was against the tradition of the green baize apron to indulge the general public with promiscuous "sirs," but, in handing ceremoniously the parcel to Private Hollis, democracy in its purest form deferred a little to his martial aspect.

Bill never felt less in need of his father-in-law's compliments than at that moment, but the abrupt departure of George the Barman somehow forced them upon him. All the same, as Private Hollis fitted the key into the shop door he wondered what the Old Swine was up to now.

Divested of its trappings on the sitting-room table the parcel turned out to be a handsome bottle of port wine. It would not have been human for William Hollis to remain impervious to this largesse from the famous cellar of the Duke of Wellington. And he knew by the screen of cobwebs that it was out of the sacred corner bin.

Bill was puzzled. What had come over the Old

Pig! However . . . With the care of one who knew the worth of what he handled he put the royal visitor in the cupboard, among plebeian bottles of stout and beer, and then proceeded, chuckling rather grimly at certain thoughts, to help Melia "set the dinner."

It was a modest feast, but when in the course of time he sat down to carve a roast turkey, a plump and proper young bird, flanked with sausages and chestnuts, he informed Melia "that he wouldn't give a thank you to dine with the King of England." She could not help smiling at this disloyal utterance, which so ill became his uniform, as she freely ladled out bread sauce, that purely Anglo-Saxon dainty, for which his affection amounted almost to a passion, and helped him hugely to potatoes and Brussels sprouts, so that it should be no fault of hers if he was unable to plead provocation for his lapse. Plum pudding followed. It was of the regulation Blackhampton pattern and Melia, no mean cook when she gave her mind to it, had given her mind to this one, so that it expressed her genius and the festive genius of her native city in a hearty time of cheer.

At the end of the meal, in spite of the fact that he was told rather sternly "to set quiet," he insisted like a soldier and a sportsman in helping to clear the table and in bearing a manly but subordinate part in the washing up. And when the table had once more assumed the impersonal red cloth of its hours of leisure, a couple of wine glasses were produced, which, al-

though polished twice a week, had not seen active service for fifteen years, and then William drew the cork of the cobwebbed bottle.

"Not a drop for me, Bill."

"You've got to have it, Mother."

"No, Bill."

"Yes. Fairation!" He gave one deep sniff at the glass he had measured already with a care half reverent, half comic. "By Gum, it's prime." In spite of protests he poured out another glass. "Fairation! Better drink the health, eh, of the Old Un as it's Christmas Day."

They honored the Old Un discreetly, in a modest sip of a wine which of itself could not have denied him a claim to honor, and then with equal modesty they drank to each other.

Melia then had an inspiration, though not subject to them as a rule, and due in this case, no doubt, to the juice of the grape. She procured a plate full of walnuts from beyond the curtained door and they entered on a further phase of discreet festivity. Bill insisted on cracking three nuts and peeling them for her with his own delicately accomplished fingers; and in the process he complimented her on the Christmas fare and hoped piously that "the Chaps had had half as good."

Mention of the Chaps moved him for the first time to reminiscence. As was to be expected, the Blackhampton Battalion was one of the wonders of the

world. To begin with, its members were nearly all gentlemen. All the nobs of the town under forty were tommies in the B.B. It was very remarkable that it should be so, but there the fact was. And it made men of his sort who liked to think a bit when they had the time to spare feel regular democratic when they saw real toffs like Lawyer Mossop's nephew, Marling the barrister, carting manure, or the son of Sir Reuben Jope on his knees scrubbing the floor of the sergeants' mess.

To mix in such company was a rare opportunity for a man who knew how to use it. Melia had noted already that Bill had learned to express himself better, that his conversation was at a higher level and that it was full of new ideas. And these facts were never so palpable as when, slowly and solemnly, a furtive light of humor in his blue eyes, he went on to tell of his great Bloomer.

It seemed that the cubicle next to his was occupied by a man named Stanning, and he had got to be rather pals with him. Stanning was a serious sort of cove with hair turning gray at the temples, but Private Hollis had been attracted to him because he was one of the right sort and because it was clear from his talk that he had thought and seen a bit. He was a good kind of man to talk to, a sympathetic sort of card, one of those who made you feel that you had things in common.

Private Hollis gradually got so "thick" with Private

Stanning that they began to discuss things in an intellectual way, politics one time, education another, so on and so on, until one evening they found themselves talking of Art. As Melia knew, Private Hollis had a feeling for Art. Many an hour had he spent in the City Museum, looking at its collection of famous pictures; and he told Private Stanning of the water color he had done of the Sharrow at Corfield Weir, inspired by the great work on the same subject of his celebrated namesake Stanning, R.A., which had been bought by the City Authorities for the fabulous sum of a thousand guineas. . . .

Over the walnuts and the wine Private Hollis began to chuckle hugely as his great Bloomer came back to his mind in all its entrancing details. . . .

P. H. When I first see the price mentioned in the *Evening Star* I says to my Missus that's the way they chuck public money about. No picture was never painted, not a Hangelo nor even a Lord Leighton that was ever worth a thousand guineas. It's a fancy price.

P. S. 'Tis in a way. A matter of sentiment, I suppose.

P. H. Just what I said to the Missus. However, being a bit of a critic I went to examine that picture for myself. And would you believe it, Stanning—I'm not saying this to flatter you because the chap who done it has the same name as yours—when I see that picture it fair knocked me endways. You see I know

every yard of Corfield Weir; in my time I've had more than one good fish out of it; and as soon as I set eyes on it, I said to myself, "Stanning R.A.'s a fisherman. He's chosen one of them gray days that's good for barbel." I give you my word, he'd got just the proper light coming out of the valley and stealing along the Sharrow. Only an artist and a fisherman could have done it.

P. S. Did you ever get bream there?

P. H. I should say so. And I've had trout in my time.

P. S. Trout?

P. H. I'm talking of twenty years back. But to resume. I see at a glance why the City Authorities had paid a thousand guineas for that picture. It was not because Stanning, R.A., was a local man; it was pure merit and I felt very glad it was so.

P. S. Glad you thought so.

P. H. You know, of course, that Stanning, R.A., is Blackhampton born?

P. S. So I've heard.

P. H. Born in that old house with the high-walled garden along Blue Bell Hill that was pulled down to widen the road.

P. S. That so?

P. H. By the way, Stanning, is he a relation of yours? Of course, it's a very common name in the City.

P. S. Ye—es, I suppose he is in a way.

P. H. That's something to be proud of. I'm not saying it to flatter you, but at this minute I'd rather be Stanning, R.A., than any one else in the wide world.

Private Stanning laughed like a good one.

P. H. Honest. I'm not talking out of the back of my neck. Stanning, R.A., for me. You can have all my share of the Kitcheners and the Joffres and the von Klucks. If I could be born again and born somebody as mattered I'd like to be Stanning, R.A. Why, what the hell are you grinning at?

P. S. That's rheumatism. And if you'll only take it over, old son, you can have all the remainder of my interest in Stanning, R.A., as a going concern.

P. H. What! do you mean to say——!

"I told you, Mother," concluded Private Hollis in his port-wine-inspired narrative, "that he was going gray at the temples And there he set like a himage at the foot of his shakedown all twisted with rheumatics, groaning like one o'clock. And then he began to laugh. Queer world, ain't it, what?"

Melia, however, was one of those precise but rather immobile intellects with which her tight little native island is full to overflowing. "You don't mean to say, Bill, it was Stanning, R.A., himself?"

"You bet your life it was." Private Hollis handed a pealed walnut, his masterpiece so far, across an expanse of red tablecloth. "One of the youngest R.A.'s on record, but a bit long in the tooth for the Army. And we're pals, I tell you. One of these days I'm

going to take him barbel fishing at Gawsey's Pool. And he's given me a couple of lessons in drawing already. If only I'd begun sooner I think I might have done something."

It was such an incredible story that Melia was fain to smile, but Private William Hollis, inspired by port wine and enthusiasm, lingered lovingly over his portrait of one who stood forth in his mind as the greatest man the city of Blackhampton had yet produced.

XXII

FORTY-EIGHT hours is not a long time even as time is reckoned in a world war, when the infinitely much can happen in a little space. Only one-fourth of that term, a meager twelve hours, was permitted to Russia by Germany in which to decide whether she should yield unconditionally to an unheard of demand, on pain of provoking that conflict, the end of which even some of the most penetrating minds in Blackhampton were hardly able to predict with certainty. So much may happen in a little while. Yet Private Hollis had just four times as long to re-establish terms of conjugal felicity with his wife Melia. In that period he kissed her twice.

Whether that Christian practice would have continued as a regular thing is difficult to say. This was a special occasion and these were not demonstrative natures. Even in the heyday of their romance, when Love not being quite strong enough to turn the door handle, peered once or twice through the keyhole, yet without ever proving quite bold enough to come in and make himself at home on that childless hearth, they were too practical to acquire a permanent taste for that particular kind of nonsense.

Still, it hardly does to dogmatize in time of war. For as the forty-eight hours went on, Melia seemed to grow more and more impressed by Private Hollis, his martial bearing. Or it may have been the uniform. Why is it that any kind of uniform has such a fatal attraction for the ladies?

In this case, at any rate, it seemed to make a remarkable difference. There is no doubt it suited Bill. He looked so much more a man in it; his chest was bigger, his back was straighter, his hair was shorter, his chin was cleaner and the ragged mustache that used to be all over his face was now refined to the extreme point of military elegance. Really he came much nearer to the ideal of manhood there had been in Melia's mind when she had first married him. Besides he was so much surer of himself, his voice was deeper, his bearing more authoritative, his talk was salted with infinitely more knowledge and wisdom.

When the time came for Private Hollis to return to his regiment, the boy who delivered the vegetables was left in charge of the shop, while Melia in Sunday attire went to see her man off at the Central Station. It was a compliment he had hardly looked for; all the same it was appreciated. Somehow it made a difference. Other wives, mothers, sisters, sweethearts were thick on the ground for a similar purpose, but Private Hollis was of opinion that Melia with her serious face and a figure you couldn't call stout and in a hat she had trimmed herself with black and white

wings was somehow able to hold her own with the best of them.

Moreover they parted at the carriage door as if they meant something to each other now. It was a public place but he kissed her solemnly and she said, "You'll write me a bit oftener, Bill, won't you?" in the manner of the long ago. Then the train began to move, he waved a hand and she waved hers; and each trundled back alone to a hard life with its many duties, yet somehow, in a subtle way, the stronger and the happier for that brief interregnum.

Life had altered for them both in that short time. They saw each other with new eyes or perhaps with old eyes reawakened. Sixteen years had rubbed so much of the bloom off their romance that it was a miracle almost that they were able to renew it. Yet the delicate process was only just beginning. It was very odd, but the trite and difficult business of existence was colored now continually with new thoughts about each other. Neither had ever been a great hand at writing letters, but Bill suddenly burgeoned forth into four closely written pages weekly, and Melia, flattered but not to be outdone, burst out in equal volume.

His letters were really very interesting indeed and so were hers, although of course in an entirely different way. She was kept abreast of the military situation and the latest Service gossip, with spicy yarns of the Toffs with whom he rubbed shoulders as an

equal in the B.B., not omitting the details of an ever-ripening friendship with Private Stanning, who, however, was soon to acquire the rank of a full corporal. Melia, of course, had not the advantage of this range of information or contiguity to high affairs, nor did her letters sparkle with soldierly flashes of wit and audacity, but week by week they gave a conscientious account of the state of the business, of sales and purchases, of current prices and money outstanding, all in the manner of a careful bookeeper, who, now she had been put on her mettle, was able and willing to show that the root of the matter was in her.

Bill, in consequence, had to own that the business in all its luckless history had never been so flourishing. They didn't like admitting it, but in their hearts they knew that this new prosperity was directly due to "the damned interference" (military phrase) of the august proprietor of the Duke of Wellington. Some men are hoo-doos, they are born under the wrong set of planets; whatever they do or refrain from doing turns out equally unwise. W. Hollis Fruiterer had always been one of that kind. If he bought a barrel of Ribstone Pippins they went bad before he could sell them, if he bought William pears they refused to ripen, if he bought peas or runner beans he would have done better with gooseberries or tomatoes; anything he stocked in profitable quantities was bound to be left on his hands. But the lord of Strathfieldsaye was another kind of man altogether. He simply couldn't

do wrong when it came to a question of barter. Up to a point a matter of judgment, no doubt, but "judgment" does not altogether explain it. There is a subtle something, over and beyond all mundane wisdom, that confers upon some men the Midas touch. Everything they handle turns to gold. Josiah Munt was notoriously one of that kind.

Certainly from the day he touched the moribund business of W. Hollis Fruiterer with his magic wand, it took a remarkable turn for the better. Mr. Munt's own explanation of the phenomenon was that for the first time in its history it was run on sound business lines. That had something to do with the mystery of course; not only was Josiah a man of method and foresight, he was also a man of capital. Money makes money all the world over; and of that fact Josiah's ever-growing store was a shining proof.

Not until the middle of the summer did Bill get leave again. And then there was a special reason for it. The Battalion had been ordered to France. That was an epic Saturday evening in July when he came home with full kit, brown as a bean, hard as a nail, in rare fighting trim. Time was his own until the Thursday following, when he had to go to Southampton to join the Chaps.

Martial his bearing at Christmas, but it was nothing to what it was now. There seemed to be a consciousness of power about him. For one thing he was wearing the stripe of a lance corporal. Then, too, he was

a small man, and, as biologists know, small men always have a knack of looking bigger than they are really. Physically speaking, great men are generally on the small side, perhaps for the reason that they have more vitality. Certainly Corporal Hollis, on the eve of his Odyssey, looked more important than the neighbors ever thought possible. Poor Melia began to wonder if she would be able to live up to him.

Melia had never been to London and when Bill proposed that she should accompany him to the metropolis and see him off from Waterloo the suggestion came as quite a shock to a conservative nature. It meant almost as much as a journey to the middle of Africa or the wilds of the Caucasus to more traveled people. She was not easily fluttered; hers was a mind of the slow-moving sort, but it was only after a night and a day, fraught with grave questionings, that she finally consented to do so.

For one thing the shop would have to close for twenty-four hours, at least; besides, and a more vital matter, even her best dress was nothing like fashionable enough for London, the capital city of the empire. Both these objections were promptly overruled. An obliging neighbor—during the last few months the neighbors had proved wonderfully obliging—consented to take charge of the shop in Melia's absence; while at the psychological moment a paragraph appeared in the *Evening Star* saying that as the Best people were making a point of wearing old

clothes, any attempt at fashion in war time was bad taste. This interesting fact left so little for further discussion that at a quarter past nine on the morning of an ever-memorable Wednesday they steamed out of Blackhampton Central Station, London bound.

It was the beginning of a day such as M-lia had never known. Looking back upon it afterwards, and she was to look back upon it many times in the days to follow, she felt it would have been impossible to surpass it in sheer human interest. Even the journey to such a place as London was thrilling to one whose travels by train had been confined to half a dozen visits to Duckingfield, two to Matlock Bath and one to Blackpool at the age of seven, nice places yet relatively unimportant in comparison with the capital city of the British Empire.

As the train did not leave for Southampton until well on in the evening they had about eight hours in which to see the sights. And so much happened in those eight hours that they made a landmark in their lives. Indeed they began with so signal an event that the muse of history peremptorily demands a past chapter in which to relate it.

XXIII

AS soon as he arrived in the metropolis, Corporal Hollis with Melia rather nervously gripping his arm stepped boldly into the Euston Road to have a look at London. Almost the first thing he saw was a Canteen, a token that at once reminded him that his rifle and kit were heavy, that the wife and he had breakfasted rather early and rather hurriedly and that nothing at that moment could hope to compare with a couple of ham sandwiches and a cup of coffee.

When the question was put to Melia she was inclined to think so too, although far too bewildered by the mighty flux around her to give any special thought to the matter. However very wisely, nay providentially, as it turned out, after a moment's hesitation they decided to cross the road and follow the promptings of nature. As they passed through the inviting doors of the Canteen there was nothing to tell them that anything particular was going to happen, yet perhaps they ought to have remembered that this was London where the Particular is always happening.

They had not to fight their way through a crowd in order to get in or anything of that sort. Nor were

people walking on one another's heads when they did get in. There was plenty of room for all. Full privates were in the majority, but the non-commissioned ranks were also represented, among whom was a Scotsman who had risen to be a sergeant. But Corporal Hollis appeared to be the only warrior who had brought his lawful wedded missus. It was a breach of the rules for one thing, but there was any amount of room, and he managed to stow her away in a quiet corner where they could have a table to themselves; and then he moved across to a cubbyhole where a nice fatherly old sportsman with side whiskers and brown spats relieved him of his rifle and kit and gave him a card with a number in exchange. Then the gallant Corporal, a composite of well-bred diffidence and martial mien, sauntered up to the counter at the end of the room where a Real Smart Piece in a mob cap and jumper gave him the smile interrogative. After a moment's survey of the good things around him, he magnificently went the limit. The limit was ninepence: to wit, two fried eggs, a rasher of bacon, bread and butter and a cup of tea; in this case ditto repeato, once for himself, once for Melia.

The Corporal was by no means sure that the R.S.P. would stand for a Twicer but she was one of the noble breed that prefers to use common sense rather than raise obstacles. After one arch glance in the direction of Melia she booked the order without demur.

In the process of time the order was executed and

they set to upon this second breakfast with a breadth of style which almost raised it to the dignity of luncheon. By the time they were through it was half-past midday already, and they were discussing this fact and its bearing on the general program when the great Event began to happen.

It came about unobtrusively, in quite a casual way. Neither the Corporal nor his lady paid much attention at first, but of a sudden the nice fatherly old sportsman who had relieved the former of his rifle and kit came out of his cubbyhole and a dashing trio of R.S.P.'s emerged from a mysterious region at the back of beyond, proving thereby that the counter had no monopoly of these luxuries, and the Scotch sergeant moved a pace or two nearer the door, where the London daylight seemed a bit better in quality, and then Bill's R.S.P., who was absolutely the pick of the bunch, although such comparisons are invariably as idle as they are to be deplored, was heard to use a word that appeared to rhyme with Mother.

Of course it could not have been Bother or any word like it. And whatever it may have been, was not, at that moment, as far as the Corporal and his lady were concerned, of the slightest importance. To them it meant nothing. It meant less than nothing. For a startling rumor was afoot. . . .

The Queen was coming.

William was a military man and fully determined to bear himself with the coolness of one on parade,

but his air of stoicism was but a poor cloak to his feelings. As for Melia, if not exactly *flustered,* she was excited more than a little. Still in this epic moment it was a strengthening thought that she had had that yard and a half of new ribbon put on her hat.

That was an instance of subconscious but prophetic foresight. There was nothing to tell her that the first lady in the land would nip across from Buckingham Palace as soon as she heard that Bill was in London. It was hardly to have been expected. In the first place it was truly remarkable that she should so soon have heard of his arrival. And of course it was by no means certain that this casual and informal visit of hers was inspired by William. In fact if you came to think of it——

But there was really no time to weigh the pros and the cons of what after all was a superfluous inquiry, for a commotion had arisen already beyond the farther door. And even at this late moment, and in spite of a general stiffening of the phalanx of R.S.P.'s and other details, and the stately advance of the nice old warrior through the swing doors into the Euston Road, even then Corporal Hollis, with true military skepticism, was not sure that it was not an Oaks.

However the question was soon settled. The commotion increased, the throng of important looking people surprisingly grew, and in the midst of it appeared a lady whom William and Melia would have

known anywhere. She was remarkably like her portraits except that the reality surpassed them. There was a great deal of bowing and walking backwards and the serried rows of R.S.P.'s made curtsys, and then all ranks stood up and removed their hats. William and Melia stood up too, but only William doffed his helmet.

It was the Scotsman who claimed the first share of the august visitor's notice. Her eye lit at once on this son of Caledonia, who unconsciously, by sheer force of climate, began to tower above all the rest, returning answer for question with inimitable coolness and mastery. All the Saxons present were lost in envy, but they were fain to acquiesce in the stern truth that nature has made it impossible to keep back a Scotsman. In spite of top hats and swallow-tails it was clear at a glance that he was the best man there.

All the same the august visitor, helped by a simple and friendly lady who accompanied her, contrived to distribute her favors impartially. The son of Caledonia was so compelling that it would have been a pleasure to talk to him for an hour, but duty and justice forbade, and she found a smile and a word for humbler mortals. Among these, and last of all in her tour of the large room were Bill and Melia.

Corporal Hollis could not be expected to display the entrain of a sergeant of the Black Watch. Be-

sides he had yet to cross the water whereas Caledonia's son was a hero of Mons and the Marne. But the gallant corporal did his regiment no discredit in that great moment, likewise his wife Melia, nor famed Blackhampton, his fair natal city.

XXIV

WHEN about twenty minutes later William and Melia, haloed with history, emerged from the precincts of the Canteen, and as they did so treading, in a manner of speaking, the circumambient air, they were at once confronted by the spectacle of Bus 49 next the adjacent curb. And Bus 49, according to its own account of the matter, was going amongst other places to Piccadilly Circus.

It was the first visit of the Corporal to the metropolis, but in his mind was lurking the sure knowledge that Piccadilly Circus was the exact and indubitable center thereof; and by an association of ideas, he also seemed to remember that Piccadilly Circus was where the King lived. Such being the case, the apparition at that moment of Bus 49 was about as providential as anything could have been.

It was the work of an instant to get aboard the gracious engine, so swift the workings of the human mind in those dynamic moments when Fate itself appears, as the sailors say, to stand by to go about. Moreover the conductor had politely informed the Corporal that there was room for two on the top.

That was a golden journey, a kind of voyage to

silken Samarcand and cedared Lebanon, allowing of course for reduction according to scale. So miraculously were their hearts attuned to venturing, that for one rapt hour they drank deep of poetry and romance this glorious midday of July.

Bus 49 knew its business thoroughly, no bus better. Instead of turning pretty sharp to the left into that complacent purlieu Portland Place, as a bus of less experience might have done in order to follow the line of flight of some mythical crow or other, it chose to go on and on, past Madame Tussaud's, the Hotel Great Central, and then by a series of minor but hardly less historic landmarks along Edgware Road to the Marble Arch, thence via Park Lane to Hyde Park Corner.

No doubt Bus 49 had ideas. The ordinary machine of commerce would have got from Euston to Piccadilly Circus in two shakes of a duck's tail. Not so this accomplished metropolitan, this gorgeous midday of July. From Hyde Park Corner it proceeded to Victoria, thence via the Army and Navy Stores to the Houses of Parliament, down Whitehall, past the lions and Horatio, Viscount Nelson, past the Crédit Lyonnais, up the Haymarket and so at last to Swan and Edgar's corner, where William and Melia dismounted, thrilled as never before in all their lives.

Piccadilly Circus, all the same, was a shade disappointing. It was not quite so grand as they expected. The Criterion was just opposite, but they looked in

vain for the King's residence. There did not appear to be a sign of that. Bill, however, noticed a policeman, and decided to make inquiries.

"I want Buckingham Palace, please," said the wearer of the King's uniform.

Constable X 20, an intelligent officer, told the gallant corporal to walk along Piccadilly, to which famous thoroughfare he pointed with professional majesty, to turn down the street of Saint James, to keep right on until he got to the bottom and then to ask again.

The constable was thanked for his lucidity and William and Melia proceeded according to instructions. Along Piccadilly itself their progress was a triumph. For, as Melia was quick to observe, all the best people saluted Bill. Of course they could tell by the stripe on his sleeve that he had been made a corporal, but such open, public and official recognition of his merit was intensely gratifying. Brass-hatted, beribboned, extraordinarily distinguished looking warriors were as punctilious as could be in saluting Bill. Those placed less highly, the rank and file, the common herd, paid him less attention, but what were these in the scale of an infinitely larger and nobler tribute? By the time William and Melia turned down Saint James his street, had an observant visitor from Mars had the privilege of walking behind them he would have been bound to conclude that the most important man in the Empire was Corporal Hollis.

He would not have been alone in that feeling for Melia was in a position to share it with him. In fact by the time they had traversed the historic thoroughfare and had reached Pall Mall the feeling dominated her mind. On every hand the great ones of the earth mustered thicker and thicker, but they kept on saluting Bill. Such a reception was hardly to have been expected at the center of all things, yet in those thrilling moments so proud was Melia of her man that it did not seem very surprising after all.

They crossed the road to the fine and ancient building with the clock on it, and after making quite sure that the King didn't live there—a pardonable delusion under which for a moment they had labored—they proceeded past it, leaving Marlborough House on the port bow, and then suddenly, as they came into the Mall, they caught a first glimpse of that which they were out for to see.

Converging slowly upon the King's residence Melia's courage began to fail.

It was a very warm day for one thing. And the sentry in his box, not to mention his brethren marching up and down in front of the railings, may have daunted her. Moreover, the Palace itself was an exceeding stately pile. Besides, she had seen the Queen already. And Bill had passed the time of day with her. Thus it was, gazing in silent awe through those stern railings across that noble courtyard, Melia suddenly made up her mind.

"No, Bill, I don't think I'll see the King to-day—not in this dress."

Corporal Hollis looked solemnly at the dress in question and then at its wearer. "It's as *you* like, you know, Mother," he said.

XXV

AFTER that they walked about for a while, but the day was terribly hot, and all too soon the process of seeing London on foot amid the dust of a torrid July began to lose its charm for Melia. Besides, had they not seen the best of London already? Piccadilly Circus, it was true, was a washout; but they had seen Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, Trafalgar Square, and the outside of Madame Tussaud's. Even in such a place as London what else was there to compare with these glories?

Such skepticism, however, was not according to the book, and the Special Providence which had been detailed to look after them on this entrancing day was soon able to bring that fact to their notice. For when they had come to the quadriga at the southwestern extremity of the Green Park, an equestrian piece which in the opinion of Corporal Hollis would have done no discredit to the recognized masterpieces in Blackhampton's famous gallery, and they had sincerely admired it and the Corporal had placed his judgment on record, lo! beyond the arch, a short stone's throw away, a certain Bus, 26 by name, the exact replica of Bus

49, that immortal machine, was miraculously awaiting them.

Bus 26 was going to the Zoölogical Gardens. And the highly efficient Special Providence who had the arrangements in hand had contrived to book two places on the top. That is to say its conductor informed the Corporal with an indulgent smile that there was just room outside for one and a little one. Whether the conductor would have extended the same accommodating politeness to a mere civilian belongs to the region of conjecture, but room was undoubtedly found for the Corporal's lady, and by taking upon his knee a future Wellington—under the shadow of whose effigy the pleasing incident occurred—in the person of a Boy Scout in full panoply of war, the gallant Corporal contrived to make room for himself also.

At the Zoölogical Gardens they admired George, although rather glad to find that he was only a distant relation. They pitied the polar bears, they shuddered at the pythons, the parrots charmed them, the larger carnivora impressed them deeply! and then the Corporal looked at his watch, found it was a quarter to four and promptly ordered an ample repast for two persons.

The Genie in attendance made no bones at all about finding a small private table for them, beneath the shade of a friendly deodar which gave a touch of the Orient to the northwestern postal district and there

they sat for one sweet and memorable hour. Perhaps it was the sweetest, most memorable hour that life so far had given them. She admired this man of hers in a way she had long ceased expecting to admire him; she was proud of him, she was grateful to him for the great sacrifice he was making. And when the inner Corporal had been comforted, a crude fellow who has to be humored even in moments of feeling, and he had lit a Blackhampton Straight Cut, a famous sedative known from Bond Street to Bagdad, he took the hand of the honest woman opposite.

Somehow he was glad to think that she belonged to him. The rather pale face, the careworn eyes, the tired smile were all he had to nerve him for the task ahead. These his only talisman in this grim hour. Yet, a true knight, he asked no more. She was his, a homely thing but a good and faithful one, who had once believed in him, who had come to believe in him again. He was able to recall the sacrifices she had made for him, for her faith in him, for her vision of him. As he looked across at her he felt content to bear the gauge of this honest, doggedly courageous woman who had helped to buckle on his armor. He must see that he didn't disgrace her.

There was not much to say to one another. At the best of times they were seldom articulate. But she was able to tell him that she would be very lonely without him. And she made him promise solemnly to do his best to come back to her safely.

"You mean it?" He knew she meant it, but he allowed himself the luxury of embarrassing her. There was a subtle pleasure in it, even if it was not quite fair.

"You know I do, Bill. I'll be that lonely."

Poor old girl! Of course she would be lonely. It made him sigh a little when he thought how lonely she would be. He looked at her with a rather queer softness in his eyes. Their marriage seemed to have brought them no luck in anything. A time there had been, a time less than a year ago, when he had felt very thankful that there had been no children to hasten their steady, hopeless drift downhill. Now, however, it was a different story. Poor Melia! Her hand responded to the pressure of his fingers; and a large tear crept slowly into eyes that had known them perhaps too seldom.

"Never mind, Mother," he said softly. "I mean to come back."

"Yes, Bill." The words had a curious intensity. "I mean you to. I've set my mind on it. And if you really set your mind on a thing happening——"

He loved the spirit in her, even if he felt obliged to touch wood as a concession to the manes of wisdom. It didn't do to boast in times like these.

Presently they noticed that the heat was less. Bill looked again at his watch and then they realized that the hour of parting had drawn much nearer. Reluctantly they got up and left the gardens, so putting an

end to an hour of life they would never forget. Then arm in arm they walked to Euston which was not far off, where the Corporal retrieved his kit from the Canteen and exchanged a valedictory smile with a R.S.P., although he didn't feel like smiling. Thence by Tube to Waterloo. It was their first experience of this medium of travel. Even in Blackhampton, in so many ways the home of modernity, Tubes were unknown; they seemed exclusively, rather bewilderingly, metropolitan.

The attendant Genie had to be watchful indeed to prevent their going all round London en route from Euston to Waterloo, but it was so alive to its duties that they were only once baffled and then but temporarily. Thus in the end they found themselves on a seat on Platform Six with a full hour to wait for the Southampton train.

She left him at the carriage door, a few minutes before he was due out on his own grim journey, so that she might have plenty of time to catch the train for the north. Minute instructions had to be given to enable her to do this, for London is a bewildering maze to those not up to its ways. But the Corporal's lady had a typical Blackhampton head, a thing cool, resolute, hardy in the presence of any severe demand upon it; and he was quite sure, and she was quite sure, that she would be able to catch the 8:55 from Euston, no matter what traps were laid for her.

It was a very simple good-by, but yet they were

torn by it in a way they had hardly expected. She with her worn face and tired eyes was all there was to hold him to life—she and a terrible, impersonal sense of duty which seemed to frighten him almost. As he watched the drab figure disappear among the crowd on the long platform he couldn't help wondering. . . .

But it was no use wondering. He must set his teeth and get his head down and try to stick it no matter what the dark fates had in store.

XXVI

THE Corporal even at his best was not a great hand at writing letters. And the series he wrote from France did not flatter his powers. Really they told hardly anything and that which they did tell might have been far more vividly rendered. Still in the eyes of Melia they were precious; and they did something to soften months of loneliness and toil.

One other gleam there was in that sore time; a fitful one, no doubt, and the ray it cast upon her life so dubious, that, all things considered, it meant small comfort. Yet, perhaps, it may have been wrong not to accept this doubtful boon more gratefully.

One morning, about a fortnight after Bill's departure for France, her father paid one of his periodical visits to Love Lane. Since W. Hollis Fruiterer had taken a turn for the better he was content with a monthly survey instead of a weekly one in order to assure himself that the enterprise was shipshape and its affairs in order.

Melia's reception of her father was invariably cool. She had a proud, unyielding nature, and Josiah's tardy concession to the sternness of the times even if it had thawed the ice a little had not really melted it. Neither was quite at ease in the presence of the

other; in both was a smoldering resentment and the spirit of unforgiveness.

The books, on inspection, proved to be in very fair order. They were carefully and neatly kept and, in comparison with the state of affairs before a business man came on the scene to direct them, they showed a refreshing change for the better. The accounts had been made up to the half year. And as a result of eight months trading under new conditions there was a clear profit of forty-five pounds after a full allowance for expenses.

Josiah expressed himself well satisfied. In common with the great majority of his race, material success was the shrine at which he worshiped. Success in this case, moreover, was doubly gratifying; it lent point to his own foresight and judgment and it exhibited a latent capacity in his eldest daughter. Time alone would be able to disperse the bitterness he cherished against her in his heart, but it did him good to feel that she was not wholly a fool and that in some quite important particulars she was a chip of the old block.

He congratulated her solemnly in the manner of a Chairman of Directors addressing a General Manager and hoped she would go on as she had begun. Resentful as she still was, she was secretly flattered by the compliment; and she hastened to offer to repay the sum he had advanced for the satisfaction of the former creditors.

"Let it stand over," he said, "until your position's a bit firmer."

She insisted, but he was not to be shaken; and then, as was his way when at a loss for an argument, he gave the contest of wills a new, unexpected turn. "Doing anything particular Sunday afternoon?"

No, she was not doing a thing particular.

"Better come up home and have a cup of tea with us." Then in a tone less impersonal: "Your mother would like to see you."

The blood rushed over Melia's face. At first she feigned not to hear, but that did not help her. Dignity had many demands to make, but the brusque insistence of this father of hers seemed to cut away the ground on which it stood.

"Say what time and I'll send the car for you."

The tone was so final that anything she could raise in the way of protest seemed weakly ridiculous. But the car for *her!* She didn't want the car and she mustered force enough to say so.

"Might as well have it. Doing nothing Sunday. Save you a climb up the hill this hot weather."

Of one thing, however, she was quite sure. She didn't want the car. This recent and remarkable expression of her father's wealth and ever-growing social importance had taken the form of a superb motor and a smart lady chauffeur in the neatest of green liveries which already she had happened to see on two occasions in Waterloo Square. No, such a ve-

hicle was not for her; and she contrived to say so with the bluntness demanded by the circumstances, yet tempered a little by a certain regard for anything her father might be able to muster in the way of feelings.

"Might as well make use of it," he said. "Eating its head off Sunday afternoon."

But she remained quite firm. The car was not for her.

"Well, it's there for you if you want it." His air was majestic. "Better pay that money into the bank. And I shall tell your mother to expect you Sunday téa time."

It was left at that. He had gained both his points. The third was subsidiary; it didn't matter. All the same it was like Josiah to raise it as a cover for those that did.

XXVII

MELIA was frankly annoyed with herself for not having put up a better resistance. The sight of her father strutting down the street with the honors of war upon him was a little too much for her. He had been guilty of sixteen years of tyrannical cruelty and she was unable to forgive. In those sixteen years she had suffered bitterly and her stubborn nature had great powers of resentment.

Who was he that he should walk down Love Lane not merely as if he owned it—in sober truth he now owned half—but also the souls of the people who lived there? She could not help resenting that invincible flare, that overweening success, particularly when she compared it with the fecklessness of the man she had so imprudently married. After all, she was the first-born of this vain image and she knew his shortcomings better than he knew them himself. He had had more than his share of luck. No matter what the world might think of him, however fortune might treat him, he was not worthy of the position he had come to occupy.

As soon as the ponderous broadcloth back had turned the corner of Love Lane and was lost in that strong-moving stream, Mulcaster Road, she made up

her mind that she would not go up to tea on Sunday afternoon. It was not that he really cared whether she went or not; had he done so he would have asked her sooner. Maybe his conscience was pricking him a bit, but he was not one to be much troubled in that way. In any case let it hurt him—so much the better if it did. This was a matter in which she would like him to be hurt as he had never been hurt before.

Here again, however, her father had an unfair advantage. If she stayed away on Sunday she might punish him a little—and even that was doubtful—but she would certainly punish her mother far more. And she had not the slightest wish to do that. She was sorry for her mother, whose sins of omission sprang from weakness of character. Nature had placed her in a very different category. She had fought this tyrant as hard as it was in her to fight any one, but she was one of nature's underlings whose lot was always to be trampled on.

Alas, if Melia didn't turn up on Sunday it was her mother who would suffer. And it was a matter in which she had suffered too much already. Melia had no particular affection now remaining for her mother; she even despised her for being so poor a creature, but at least her only crime was weakness and it was hardly fair that she should endure more than was necessary. Melia's was rather a masculine nature in some ways; at any rate her father and she had one trait

in common. They had a sense of justice. Hence she was now on the horns of a dilemma.

It was not until Sunday itself, after morning service at Saint George's, that the decision was finally made. And then fortified by Mr. Bontine, a clergyman for whom Melia had a regard, she decided much against her inclination to go up to The Rise in the afternoon. It was a reluctant decision, made in soreness of heart; the only satisfaction to be got out of it would arise from the dubious process which the reverend gentleman described as "conquest of self."

She set out rather later than she meant to, in a decidedly heavy mood. And it was not made lighter by the fact that the afternoon was sultry with the promise of thunder, and that the long and tedious climb to The Rise had to be made without the help of the tram on which she had counted. Long before the trams from the Market Place had reached the end of Love Lane they were full to overflowing, as she ought to have known they would be on a fine Sunday afternoon in the middle of the summer. In the process of painfully mounting the stuffy length of mean streets to achieve the space and grandeur of The Rise she grew vexed and hot. When at last she reached the famous eminence she was far indeed from the frame of mind proper to the paying of a call in its exclusive society. But it served her right. She should have stayed at home, or at least have allowed the motor to be sent for her.

As it was, it was nearly five o'clock when, limp and fagged, she came at last in view of the many-windowed, much-gabled elevation of Strathfieldsaye. In spite of herself the sight of it made her feel nervous. It was the home of her father and mother, but its note of grandeur gave her a cruel sense of her own inadequacy. At the brilliantly painted gate she lingered a moment. Courage was called for to walk up the broad gravel path as far as the porch with its fine oak door studded with brass nails.

At last, however, she went up and rang the bell. An extremely grand parlor maid received her almost scornfully, and led her across a slippery but superb entrance hall which was disconcertingly magnificent. It was hard to grasp at that moment that such an interior was the creation of her commonplace parents, harder still to believe that this servant whose clothes and manners were superior to her own was at their beck and call.

However, she would go through the ordeal now she had got so far. But this afternoon luck was heavily against her. The ordeal proved to be more severe than even her gloomiest moments had foreshadowed. She was ushered just as she was, in her shabby hat and much mended gloves, straight into the drawing room into the midst of company. And the company was of the kind she would have given much to avoid.

She had hoped that she might find her mother alone, or at the worst, drinking tea with her father. In-

stead, the first person she saw was the insufferable Gertrude Preston, that mass of airs and graces which always enabled their wearer to stand out in Melia's mind as all that a woman ought not to be. And as if the sight of Gertrude was not sufficiently chilling and embarrassing, the second person she realized as being present was her own stuck-up sister Ethel, invariably known in the family as Mrs. Doctor Cockburn. She was accompanied, however, by her two children, little peacocks of six and seven, spoiled fluffy masses of pink ribbons and conceit.

Last of all was her mother. She was always last in any assembly. Somehow she never seemed to count. In the old days even in her own home she could always be talked down, or put out of countenance or elbowed to the wall; and now, after the flight of years, in these grand surroundings, she had not altered in the least. She still had the eyes of a rabbit and a fat hand that wobbled; and on Melia's entrance into the room Gerty and Ethel at once took the lead of her in the way they had always taken it.

"Why, I do declare!" Gerty rose at once with cleverly simulated surprise tempered by a certain stock brand of archness, kept always on tap, and unfailingly effective in moments of sudden crisis or emotional tension. "How are you, Amelia?" She would have liked to offer her cheek, but the look in Amelia's eyes forbade her risking it. Therefore, a

hand had to suffice, an elegant hand, but a wary one which met with scant ceremony.

Ethel, Mrs. Doctor Cockburn, also rose, but not immediately. "Glad to see you, Amelia."

Melia knew it was a lie on Ethel's part, and had she had a little more self-possession might have been moved to say so.

The three daughters of Mr. Josiah Munt marked three stages in his meteoric career. Melia, the eldest, was the child of the primitive era. Compared with her sisters she was almost a savage. Between her and Ethel had been a boy, Josiah, whose birth had nearly killed Maria and who had died untimely in his babyhood. She was not allowed in consequence to bear any more children for ten years, and Ethel was the natural fruit of the interregnum. Ethel was generally allowed to be the masterpiece of the family. Five years after her had come Sally who perhaps in point of time and opportunity should have put out the light even of Ethel; but in her case it seemed the blessed word progress had moved a little too fast. Sally, as the world knew only too well, was over-educated; from the uplands of high intellectual development Sally had slipped over the precipice into a mental and moral abyss.

From the social and even the physical standpoint Ethel was indubitably the pick of Mr. Josiah Munt's three daughters. And Mrs. Doctor's rather frigid reception of her eldest sister showed a nice perception

of the fact. Amelia had thrown her back to a prehistoric phase. She had something of the air and manner of a charwoman. When she entered the room, little shivers had crept down Ethel's sensitive spine. She could hardly bear to look at her.

Melia also felt very uncomfortable. She couldn't find a word to say and the children stared at her. But she sat on the edge of a chair that Gerty provided; tea, bread and butter and cake were given her; she began to eat and drink mechanically, but still she felt strangely hostile and unhappy. She resented the bright plumage, the amazing prosperity of those among whom she had been born; above all, she resented Ethel's superciliousness and Gerty's patronage. Ethel, of course, had a right to be supercilious, and that fact was an added barb. Her light shone. SHE was the only one who had shed any luster on the family; her marriage with a doctor rising to eminence in the town was a model of judicious ambition. Ethel "had done very well for herself," and even the set of her hat, black tulle and white feathers and the opulent lines of her spotted muslin dress, seemed to proclaim it. Her bearing completed the picture. She had not been in the same room with Amelia for many years, although she had passed her once or twice in the street without speaking; and at the moment her judicious mind was fully engaged with the problem as to whether Gwenneth and Gwladys could or could

not call her "Auntie." Finally, but not at once, the answer was in the negative.

Amelia, without a word to say for herself, and suffering acutely from a social awkwardness which a lonely life in sordid circumstances had made much worse, was altogether out of it. Ethel and Gerty had charm and elegance; they spoke a different language; they might have belonged to a different race. Amelia's natural ally should have been her mother. They had much in common but that depressed and inefficient woman was nearly as tongue-tied as her eldest daughter. Ethel and Gerty were almost as far beyond the range of Maria as they were beyond the range of Amelia; their expensive clothes and their correct talk of This and That and These and Those, with clear, high pitched intonation filled her with dismay. Maria, even in her own drawing room, was in such awe of them that she could make no overtures to Amelia, although she simply longed to point to the vacant sofa beside her and to say, "Come and sit over here, my dear."

The eldest daughter of the house bitterly regretted the folly that had brought her among them again after so many years of outlawry. But in a few minutes her father came in and then she got on better. He was the real cause of her present sufferings, but his own freedom from self-consciousness or the least tendency to pose amid surroundings which seemed to

crave that form of weakness was exactly what the situation called for.

"Hulloa, Melia," he said heartily. "Pleased to see you, gel." His lips saluted her cheek with a loud smack. There was not a suspicion of false shame about him. He was master in his own house at any rate. And when he made up his mind to do a thing he did it thoroughly. "What do you think on 'em?" He pointed to his grandchildren rather proudly. "That's Gwennie. And that's Gladdie. This is your Auntie Melia."

The ears of Mrs. Doctor Cockburn began to burn a little as the eyes of Gwennie and Gladdie grew rounder and rounder.

"Gladdie favors her ma. Don't you think so, eh? And they've both got a look of Grandma—what?"

"I see a look of you, you know, Josiah," said Auntie Gerty with an air of immense discretion.

"Um. Maybe. Have they had any strawberries, Grandma?"

Their mother thought they ought not to have strawberries, but their grandfather was convinced that a few would not hurt them and chose half a dozen himself from a blue dish on the tea table and presented them personally.

"There, Gwenneth, what do you say?" Mrs. Doctor Cockburn's own mouth was full of prunes and prisms. "Thank you what—thank you, Grandpa."

"That's a good little gel." There was a geniality,

an indulgence, in the tone of Josiah that he had never thought of extending to his own children in their nursery days. "And I tell you what, Ma—if they get a pain under their pinnies they must blame their old grand-dad."

Altogether, a pleasant episode, and to everybody, Gwenneth and Gwladys included, a welcome diversion.

"Have some more tea, Melia." Her father took her cup from her in spite of the protest her tongue was unable to utter and handed it to the inefficient lady in charge of the teapot. "And you must have a few strawberries. Fresh picked out of the garden. Ethel, touch that bell."

Mrs. Doctor, with an air of resolute fineladyism, pressed the electric button at her elbow. The grand parlor maid entered with a smile of imperfectly concealed cynicism.

"Alice, more cream!"

Melia wondered how even her father was able to address Alice in that way; but his coolness ministered to the reluctant respect he was arousing in her by his manly attitude to his own grandeur.

The cream appeared. Gwenneth and Gwladys were forbidden to have any—their lives so far had been a series of negations and inhibitions—but Melia had some, although she didn't want it, but the will of her father was greater than her powers of resistance. And

then he said to her, "When you've had your tea, I'll show you the greenus."

"Conservatory, Josiah," said Aunt Gerty with an arch preen of features and a show of plumage. "Much too big for a mere greenhouse."

"Greenus is more homelike, Gert. What do you say, Mother?" He laughed almost gayly at Maria. The eldest daughter was amazed at the change that seemed to be coming over her father. In the dismal days of drudgery and gloomy terrorism at the public house in Waterloo Square which now seemed so far away in the past, there was not a trace of this large and rich geniality. Prosperity, power, worldly success must have mellowed her father as well as enlarged him. He seemed so much bigger now, so much riper, he seemed to care more for others.

Ethel and Gertrude were quite put into the shade by the force and the heartiness of Josiah, but Mrs. Doctor was not one lightly to play second fiddle to any member of her own family. "I hear," she said, pitching her voice upon an almost perilous note of fashion—there was even a suspicion of a drawl which brought an involuntary curl to Melia's lip—"that young Nixey, the architect, has been recommended for the M.C."

"Has he so?" Josiah's eye lighted up over his suspended teacup. "I've always said there was something in that young Nixey. And I'm not often mis-

taken. He designed that row of cottages I built down Bush Lane."

"A row of cottages in Bush Lane, have you, Josiah?" said Aunt Gerty with an air of statesmanlike interest. "You seem to be what they call going into bricks and mortar."

"You bet I am—for some time now. And bricks and mortar are not going to get less in value if this war keeps on, take it from me."

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Doctor Cockburn, a judge of values.

"I've one regret." It was not like Josiah to harbor regrets of any kind, and Aunt Gerty visibly adjusted her mind to hear something memorable. "That young Nixey's as smart as paint. I nearly let him have the contract for this house. In some ways he might have suited us better."

"But this house is splendid," said Gerty with flagrant optimism. She knew in her heart that the house was too splendid.

"Young Nixey's idea was something neater, more in the Mossop style. I didn't see at the time, so I got Rawlins to do it to my own design. Of course, what I didn't like about Nixey was that he would have it that he knew better than I did, and I'm not sure——" Josiah hovered on the brink of a very remarkable admission.

"I don't agree, Josiah. This house is almost perfect." The specious Gertrude was amazed that he

of all men should be so near a confession that he might have been wrong. Dark influences were at work in him evidently.

"I agree with you, Father." Mrs. Doctor had nothing of Gerty's finesse. "The Gables is so refined, a house for a gentleman."

"Don't know about that," Josiah frowned. "Never heard of a house being refined. Comes to that, this place is good enough for me, any time." If he went so far as to own that he might have been wrong it was clearly the duty of others to hasten to contradict him. "But The Gables is more compact. More comfort somehow, and less show."

"Stands in less ground, must have cost less," said Gerty softly. "Compared to Strathfieldsaye, The Gables to my mind is rather niggardly."

"That is so, Gert." He nodded approvingly. She was always there with the right word. "All the same I believe in that young Nixey. Started, you know, at the Council School. Won a scholarship at the University. Why, I remember his mother when she used to come to the Duke of Wellington and sew for Maria. Done everything for himself. And now he's a commissioned officer in the B.B. Give honor where honor's due, I say."

Gerty and Ethel agreed, perhaps a little reluctantly. Maria expressed a tacit approval. And then Melia made the discovery that her mind had wandered as

far as France; and for a moment or so the world's pressure upon her felt a little less stifling.

"Wonderful, how that young man's got on!" There was reverence in the tone of Gerty whose religion was "getting on."

"It is." Josiah was emphatic. "You can't hold some people back. I give him another ten years to be the first architect in this town . . . if he comes through This."

"It's a big 'if.'" Before the words were out of Gerty's mouth she remembered Amelia's husband and wished them unsaid. She had not had the courage to mention William Hollis with poor Amelia so rigidly on the defensive, but she had hoped that some one would introduce the subject so that a tribute might be paid him. But no one had done so, and now that Josiah was there the time seemed to have gone by. His views in regard to Amelia's husband were far too definite to be challenged lightly.

Interest in young Nixey, the architect, began to wane and then suddenly Ethel startled them all by the statement that she had just had a letter from Sally.

Josiah's geniality promptly received a coating of ice. His mouth closed like a trap. Sally had not been forgiven by her father and those who knew him best had the least hope that she would be. Her conduct had struck him in a very tender place, and Gerty could not help thinking that it was most imprudent

of Ethel to mention Sally in his presence in any circumstances.

Ethel, however, had long ceased to fear her father. For one thing, in the eyes of the world her position was too secure. Besides, she was obtuse. Where angels, etc., Mrs. Doctor could always be trusted to walk with a certain measure of assurance, mainly because she didn't see things and feel things in the way that most people did. For that reason she was not at all disconcerted by the silence that followed her announcement. And she supplemented it with another which compelled Gerty, the adroit, to steal a veiled glance at the sphinx-like face of her brother-in-law.

"She writes from Serbia, giving a long and wonderful account of her doings with the Red Cross. I think I have her letter with me." Ethel opened a green morocco bag that was on the sofa beside her. "Yes . . . here it is . . . a long account. Care to read it, Father?" She offered the letter unconcernedly to Josiah.

He shook his head somberly. "I'll not read it now."

"Let me leave it with you. Well worth reading. But I'd like to have it back."

"No, take it with you, gel." The words were sharp. "Haven't much time for reading anything these days. Happen I'll lose it or something." It was lame and obvious, but Josiah had been taken too much by surprise to do anything better. Gerty was annoyed with Ethel. She had no right to be so tact-

less. None knew so well as Ethel the state of the case in regard to Sally. At the same time Gerty's respect for Josiah which amounted to genuine regard was a little wounded. He ought to have been big enough to have read the letter.

Ethel had contrived to banish the ease and the sunshine from the proceedings. The light of genial humor in the eyes of her father yielded to the truculence of that earlier epoch so familiar to Amelia. It was a great pity that it should be so; and after a tense moment the gallant Gerty did her best to pour oil on the vexed waters. "The other day in the *Tribune* they were praising you finely, Josiah."

"Was they?" The King's English was not his strong point in moments of tension. But in any moment, as Gerty knew, he had his share of the legitimate vanity of the rising publicist. "What did they say?"

"The *Tribune* said you deserved well, not only of your fellow townsmen, but of the country at large for the excellent work you had done in the last nine months for the national cause. They said your work on the Recruiting and Munitions Committees had been most valuable."

Josiah was visibly mollified by this piping. "Very decent of the *Tribune*."

"You'll make an excellent mayor, Josiah. Your turn next year, isn't it?"

Josiah nodded. The light came again into his eyes.

"There's no saying what sort of a mayor I'll make. It's a stiff job when you come to tackle it. Big responsibility in times like these."

"You are not the man to shirk responsibility."

Josiah allowed that he was not, but the office of mayor in a place like Blackhampton in times like these was no sinecure for a man with a sense of civic duty. Once more he clouded. From what he heard things were looking pretty bad. If England was going to win the war she should have to find a better set of brains.

"But surely the Allies are quite as clever as the Germans?"

"They may be, but they haven't shown it so far. We are a scratch lot of amateurs against a team of trained professionals. The raw material is just as good, if not better, but it takes time to lick it in to shape. And we've got to learn to use it." His gloom deepened. "Still we shall never give in to the Hun . . . not in a hundred years."

Ethel concurred in this robust sentiment. And then again she obtusely referred to Sally's letter. It was such a wonderful letter that her father really ought to read it. He was clearly annoyed by her tactless persistence. In order to cloak his feelings he called upon Melia in the old peremptory way to come and look at his tomatoes.

As they rose for that purpose, Mrs. Doctor Cockburn rose also. She must really be going; it was the

cook's evening out. Gwenneth and Gwladys were bidden to say good-by to Grandpa. They did so shyly but rather prettily.

"Now let me see you shake hands with your Auntie Melia," said Josiah.

Gwenneth and Gwladys accomplished this task less successfully. They were half terrified by this shabby, gloomy, silent woman who had not a word to say.

XXVIII

WEEKS went by and Melia settled down to a hard and lonely winter in Love Lane. She missed Bill sadly now he was no longer there. Absence had conferred all sorts of virtues upon him. She quite forgot that for many years and up till very recently she could hardly bear the sight of him about the place. Their relations as man and wife had entered upon a new and very remarkable phase.

About once a fortnight or so life was made a bit lighter for her by a penciled scrawl from somewhere in France. Bill's letters told surprisingly little, yet he maintained a kind of grim cheeriness and seemed more concerned for the life she might be leading than for anything that was happening to himself. He was very grateful for the small comforts she sent him from time to time, he was much interested in the continued prosperity of the business, and he mentioned with evident pleasure that her mother had sent him a pair of socks and a comforter she had knitted herself, also a "nice letter."

From his mother-in-law, whom Bill had always suspected of being a good sort at heart, "if the Old Un would give her a chance," he had an account of Melia's visit to Strathfieldsaye. Her mother said what plea-

sure it would give her father if she would go there every Sunday. The statement was incredible on the face of it; Bill frankly didn't know what to think, but there it was. No doubt the old girl meant kindly. Perhaps it was her idea of bucking him up.

In his letters to Melia he made no comment on the life he was leading, but in one he told her that they had moved up into the Line; in another that "the Boche had got it in the neck"; in another that "he had got the rheumatics so that he could hardly move," but that he meant to carry on as long as possible, adding, "We are very short of men."

Somehow the letters of that dark winter made her more proud than ever of this man of hers. There was a determined note of quiet cheerfulness that she had never known in him before. Instead of the eternal grumbling that had done so much to embitter her, there was a tone of whimsical humor which at a time made her laugh, although as a general rule few people found it harder than she did to laugh at anything. She had little imagination, still less of the penetration of mind that goes with it, but there was one phrase he used that was hard to forget. In one letter he was tempted to complain that the Boche had taken to raiding them in the middle of the night, but he added a postscript, "It's no use growsing here."

Somehow that phrase stuck in her mind. When she rose before daylight in the bitter mornings of midwinter to light the kitchen fire and prepare a meal

she would have to eat alone, she would remember those words which he of all men had used, he who was a born growser if ever there was one. "It's no use growsing here." She tried to take in their meaning, but the task was not easy. He wrote so cheerfully that he could hardly mean what he said. And it was his nearest approach to complaint, he whose life in peace time had been one long complaint. Now and again she read in the *Tribune* of things that made her shiver. Sometimes in the winter darkness she awoke with these things in her mind. Bill's letters, however, gave no details. If he spoke of "a scrap," he did so casually, without embroidery, yet she remembered that once when he had cut his thumb, not very badly, he fainted at the sight of blood.

Such letters were a puzzle; they told so little. She couldn't make them out. Reading between the lines, he seemed to be enjoying life more than he had ever done, he seemed to realize the humor of it more. It was very strange that it should be so, especially on the part of one who had always taken things so hard. In one letter he said that spring was coming and that the look of the sky made him think of the crocuses along Sharrow Lane, and then added as a brief postscript, "Stanning's gone."

Some weeks later he wrote from the Base to say that "he had had a whiff of gas, nothing to speak of," but that he was out of the Line for a bit. And then after a cheerful letter or two in the meantime, he

wrote a month later to say that he had got leave for ten days and that he was coming home.

It was the middle of June when he turned up in Love Lane late one evening, without notice, laden like a beast of burden, looking very brown and well but terribly worn and shabby. So much had he changed in appearance that Melia felt it would have been easy to pass him in the street without recognizing him. He was thin and gray, even his features, and particularly his eyes, seemed to have altered. The tone of his voice was different; he spoke in a different way; the words and phrases he used were not those of the William Hollis she had always known.

He was glad to be back in his home, if only for a few days, and the sight of him with his heavy pack and his gas mask and his helmet laid on the new linoleum in the little sitting room behind the shop gave her a deeper pleasure than anything life had offered her so far. Strange as he was, new almost to the point of being somebody else, the mere sight of him thrilled her. She was thrilled to the verge of happiness. It was something beyond any previous emotion. Long ago she had given up believing that ever again he would appeal to her in the way of that brief time which had been once and had passed so soon.

He took off his heavy boots and lit his pipe and seemed childishly glad to be home again. But he didn't talk much. He sighed luxuriously and smiled at her in his odd new way, yet he was interested in

the excellent supper she gave him presently and in the account she furnished of the business which was still on an ascending curve of prosperity. The old wound, still unhealed, would not allow her to praise her father, but there was more than one instance to offer of that tardy repentance; and it was hard to repress a note of pride when she announced that he was now Mayor of Blackhampton and by all accounts a good one.

She tried to get her husband to speak of France, but some instinct soon made it clear to her that he wanted to forget it. He could not be induced to speak of his experiences, made light of his "whiff of gas," but confessed it was hell all the time; he also said that the German was not a clean fighter. As he sat opposite to her, eating his supper, his reticence made it impossible for her to realize what he had been through. He did not seem to realize it himself, except that in a subtle way he was altogether changed.

He was eight days at home and they spent a lot of the time together. They had a new kind of intimacy; the world of men and affairs had altered for them both. Everything came to them at a fresh angle. They were dwellers in another atmosphere. The most commonplace actions meant much more; events once of comparatively large importance meant much less. She half suggested that they should go up on Sunday afternoon to Strathfieldsaye, but the idea evidently did not appeal to him and she did not press

it. Still she threw out the hint, because it was an opportunity to let bygones be bygones and she was sure that he would meet with a good reception. A sense of justice impelled her to be grateful to her father, much as she disliked him; in his domineering way he had tried to make amends; all the same she was not sorry that Bill was determined to hold himself aloof. It was not exactly that he bore a grudge against her father; at the point he had reached men did not bear grudges, but he had some decided views on the matter and they gained in power by not being expressed.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, which was early closing day in Blackhampton, Bill insisted on taking Melia to the Art Gallery. It was in the historic low-roofed building in New Square—which dated from the Romans—known as the old Moot Hall. It was now the home of one of the finest collections of pictures in the country. Among ancient masterpieces and some modern ones were several characteristic examples of his friend, Stanning, R.A., whom he had carried dying into a dugout not four months ago.

Corporal Hollis had it from Sergeant Stanning's own lips that the best picture he had ever painted was hung in the middle room, and that it was not the Sharrow at Corfield Weir, which the Corporal himself admired so much, but the smaller, less ambitious piece called, "The Leaves of the Tree"—a picture of the woods up at Dibley in the sunlight of October, stripped by the winds of autumn, with the bent figure

in the foreground of a very old man raking the dead leaves together.

They had no difficulty in finding it. "As the leaves of the trees are the lives of men." That legend on the gilt frame seemed to them both at that moment strangely, terribly prophetic. Bill did not tell Melia as they stood in front of the picture that he had risked his own life in a vain attempt to save the man who had painted it, nor did he tell her that the blood of the artist had dyed the sleeves of his tunic.

The large room was empty and they sat down solemnly on the settee in front of this canvas, looking at it in silence, yet as they did so holding the hand of each other like a pair of children. Once before had they sat there, in the early days of their marriage, when he had talked to her of those ambitions that were never to materialize. And now, again, with the spirit of peace upon him and stirred by old memories, he sighed to himself and spoke for a moment or two of what might have been. One of these days he had hoped to do something. He had always intended to do something but the time had slipped away.

They were still sitting there looking at the picture when two people came into the room. One was a commonplace elderly woman, the other a young man in khaki. Although they were totally unlike in the superficialities of outward bearing it was easy to tell that they were mother and son. His trained movements and upright carriage, his poise and alertness,

were not able to conceal an odd resemblance to the wholly different person at his side.

William and Melia were concealed by the high-backed, wide-armed settee on which they sat; and as these two people came up the room and took up a position behind it, they did not seem to realize that they could be overheard.

"I want you, mother," said the young man in an eager voice, "to look at what to my mind is the picture of this collection. Stand here and you'll get it just right."

The Corporal and his lady on the high-backed settee offered a silent prayer that the young man had as much wisdom and taste as the owner of such a clear, confident voice ought to have. "As the leaves of the tree are the lives of men." The Corporal breathed more freely; the young man's voice had not belied him. "Homer's words." He reeled off pat a large-sounding foreign language. "I want you to catch the ghost of the sun glancing through these wind-torn branches. You'll get the light if you stand just here. Wonderful composition . . . wonderful vision . . . wonderful harmony . . . wonderful everything. The big artists feel with their eyes." It was charming to hear the voice in its enthusiasm. "They look behind the curtain of appearances as you might say. The life of man is but the shadow of a shadow . . . you remember that bit of Lucretius I read you last night? Look at the figure in the foreground gath-

ering the leaves. Modern critics say symbolism is not art, but it depends on how it's done, doesn't it? The eyes of the mind . . . imagination . . . and that's the only key we have to the Riddle of the Sphinx." He ran on and on, laughing like a child. "Look at his color. And how spacious!—imagination there!—the harmony, the drawing! A marvelous draughtsman. If he'd lived he'd have been a second Torrington, although you hear people say that Torrington couldn't draw." He laughed like a schoolboy and then his voice fell. "I like to think that Jim Stanning was one of us, that he was born among us, and it's good to think that our old one-horse Art Committee has had the luck to buy his magnum opus without knowing it. They paid twice as much for Corfield Weir in the other room, which is not in the same class. However . . . posterity. . . ."

Prattling on and on the young man came round the corner of the settee, followed by the old lady.

And then his flow of words failed suddenly as he caught a glimpse of William and Melia, whose presence he had been far from suspecting. His little start of guilt betrayed a feeling that he had made rather an ass of himself, for he said half shamefacedly, "Come on, my dear, let's go and look at the Weir. We'll come back here later." The Corporal and his lady could only catch a glimpse of him as he led his mother abruptly into the next room; but Melia saw he was an officer with two pips on his sleeve and that

his tunic was adorned with a tiny strip of white and purple ribbon with a star on it. In answer to her questions the Corporal was able to inform her that the young man was a Captain in the B.B. and that his decorations was the M.C. with Bar.

"And he looks so young!" said Melia.

"A very good soldier," said the Corporal with a professional air.

"Who is he, Bill? I seem to remember his mother."

"It's young Nixey, the architect."

Of course! But his uniform had altered him. He looked so handsome. And that was Emma Nixey—Emma Price that was. How proud she must be to have a boy like that!

"He's a good soldier." The deep voice of the Corporal broke in upon Melia's thoughts. "A good soldier—that young feller."

"Bill, you remember Emma Price that used to live at the bottom of Piper's Hill?" There was a note of envy in the tone of Melia.

"I remember old Price, the cobbler."

"Emma was his eldest girl—no, not the eldest. Polly who married Ford, the ironmonger, was the eldest. Emma was the second. Married Harry Nixey, whose mother kept the all-sorts shop in Curwood Street. A drunken fellow, but very clever at his trade. Bolted with another woman when this lad Harold was twelve months old. Emma never saw nor heard of him again. Went to Australia, people said

at the time. But I'll say this for Emma, she was always a good plucked one."

There was a moment of silence and then the Corporal demanded weightily, "Has she any others?"

"He's the only one. But brought up very respectable . . . she's managed to give him a rare good education. How she did it nobody knows. Tremendous worker, was Emma. But that boy does her credit, I must say."

"He does that." The Corporal stared hard at the picture in front of him. "Nothing like education." He sighed softly. "If only I'd had a bit of education I sometimes think I might have done something myself."

XXIX

ON the afternoon of the day before the Corporal returned to France he went with Melia by bus to Sharrow Bridge and they walked thence to Corfield Weir. Many hours had he spent with rod and tackle in this hallowed spot. Those were the only hours in his drab life that he would have desired to live over again. Many a good fish had he played in the bend of the river below the famous Corfield Glade, much commemorated by the local poets in whom the town and county were exceptionally rich. In particular there was the legend of the fair Mary Corfield who in the days of Queen Bess had cast herself for love of an honest yeoman into the deep waters of the Sharrow. From Bill's favorite tree, where from boyhood he had spun so many dreams that had come to naught, could be seen the high chimneys of the Old Hall, the home of the ill-fated Mary, about whose precincts her ghost still walked and was occasionally seen.

The day was perfect, a rare golden opulence of sky and earth with a sheen of beauty on wood and field and flowing water. They came to the little gnarled clump of alders, his old-time friends, whom the swift-flowing Sharrow was always threatening to devour,

and lay side by side in the shade, on the dry grass, listening to the great rats plopping into the cool water.

Both were very silent at first; it was as if nature spoke to them in a new way. It was as if their eyes were bathed in a magical light. All the things around them were clearer in outline, brighter, sharper, more visible. Their ears, too, were attuned to a higher intensity. The swirl of the water, the rustle of leaves, the cry of the birds, the little voice of the wind, were more intimate, more harmonious, more audibly full of meaning. The world itself had never seemed so richly amazing, so gorgeously inexhaustible as at that moment.

At last the Corporal broke a very long silence. "Mother, it's something to have lived."

Melia did not answer at once, but presently she sighed a little and said, "I wonder, Bill."

He plucked a spear of grass. "It's a rum thing to say, but if it hadn't been for this war I don't suppose I ever should have lived, really."

She didn't understand him, and her large round eyes, a little like those of a cow, told him so.

"I've always been thinking too much about it, you see." His voice was curiously gentle. "All my life, as you might say, I've always been telling myself what a wonderful day it was going to be to-morrow. But to-morrow never comes, you see. And you keep on thinking, thinking, until you suddenly find that to-morrow was yesterday. That's how it was with me.

And if I hadn't had the guts to join up just when I did, my belief is I should never have lived at all. Understand me?"

She shook a placid head at him, not understanding him in the least. But this was the mood in which he had first captured her, in which he had first impressed her with his intellectual quality, for which, as a raw girl, who knew nothing about anything, she had had a sort of reverence. But as she had come to see, it was this very power of mind, which she had told herself was not shared by other, more common men, that had been his undoing, that had brought them both to the verge of ruin. It was fine and all that, but it didn't mean anything. It was just a kink in the machine which prevented it from working properly.

The tears sprang to her eyes as she listened to him, and her youth and his came back to her, but she turned her face to the river so that he could not see it. Still it was not all pain to hear him talking. It was the old, old way that she had loved once and had since despised, but now lying there in the shade of those old trees, with the music of the Weir and the glory of the earth and the sky all about her, she loved again. Strange that it should be so! But the sad voice at her elbow blended marvelously with all the things she could see and hear. And what it said was quite true. By some miracle both were living now more fully than ever before.

"I'll always have one regret, Mother." His voice had grown as deep as the water itself. But it broke off in the middle suddenly.

A feeling came upon her that she ought to say something. "Don't let us have no regrets, Bill." Those were the words she wanted to utter. "I'll not have none." But they were not for her to speak. At that moment she was not able to say anything. She waited tensely for him to go on talking.

In the odd way he had, which was a part of his peculiar faculty, he seemed to feel what was passing in her mind. "I'm not thinking of what might have been. That's no good. The time's gone by. I'm thinking of my friend, Stanning, R.A. You see we'd arranged that if we ever had the chance we'd come here for a day's fishing. We had a bit one day when we were up in the Line—in that canal—the Yser, I think they call it. And he said, 'Auntie, I may be able to tell you a thing or two about drawing, but when it comes to this game the boot's on the other leg.' 'Yes,' I said, 'that's because I've put my heart into it while you've put your heart into something better.' 'Well, I don't know about that,' he said—he was the broadest-minded, the best read, the wisest chap I ever talked to—'nothing is but thinking makes it so, as Hamlet, that old crackpot used to say. Whatever you happen to be doing, Auntie, the only thing that matters is whether your heart is in it.' 'Yes,' I said, 'I daresay you are right there. But it's one

thing to catch barbel. It's another to paint Corfield Weir.' "

To Melia this seemed like philosophy. And she had no head for philosophy, although inclined to be a little proud that Bill should be able to swim in these deep waters in such distinguished company. But one thing aroused her curiosity. Why was this man of hers called Auntie?

Bill laughed good humoredly when, a little scandalized, she came to put the question. "They all call me that in C company." His frankness was remarkable.

"But why?"

"They say I was born an old woman."

Melia thought it was like their impertinence and did not hesitate to say so.

"Ah, you don't know the Chaps," Bill laughed heartily. "The Chaps is a rum crowd. They call you anything."

"But to your face?" Melia couldn't help resenting it and spoke with dignity. "You oughtn't to let them, Bill."

"Why not?"

"You're a Corporal."

"Well, Stanning was a sergeant, you see. And nobody means nothing by it. It's a way they have in the army of being friendly and pleasant. And I daresay it suits me. My fingers is all thumbs as you might say. Fishing and a bit o' gardening are the

only things I'm good for, although Stanning told me that in time, if I stuck it, I might be able to draw. And that was a lot for him to say."

Melia thought that it must be.

"I often wonder,"—the eyes of the Corporal were fixed on the Sharrow—"what made Stanning take up with a chap like me. There was lots of 'em in C company with far more education, but he told me once that I was the same kind of fool that he was and I said that I wished it was so. I suppose he meant that I liked to talk about this old river and the lights on it and the look of it at different times of the year. He knew every yard of the Sharrow between here and Dibley and so did I, but he could see things that I couldn't, and he could remember 'em and he'd a wonderful eye for nature. He wasn't the least bit of a soldier, no more than myself, but he made a first-rate job of it—he was the kind of chap who would make a first-rate job of anything. Our C.O. wanted him to apply for a commission, but he said he couldn't face the responsibility. That was queer, wasn't it, in a man of that sort?—for he was a man, I give you my word." The Corporal plucked another spear of grass and began to chew it pensively. "He had a cottage up at Dibley, that largish white one on the left, standing back from the road, you know the one I mean—the one with the iron gate, and that funny sort of a tower at the end of the garden."

Melia said she did know, although she had half for-

gotten it, but she hadn't been to Dibley since they were first married, and that was a long time ago.

"It belonged to Torrington the artist. He lived and died there. Stanning said he was the greatest painter of landscape that ever lived, but nobody knew it while he was alive and he died in poverty. Not that it mattered. Stanning said that money doesn't matter to an artist, but he said that many an artist had been ruined by making it too easy."

This dictum of Stanning's sounded odd in the ear of Melia. No one could be ruined by making money too easily, but she had not the heart to contradict his disciple who was still chewing grass and looking up at the sky.

"See what I mean, Mother?"

"Makes them take to drink and gambling, I suppose." After all, there was that solution.

"Stanning meant that if an artist gets money too easy it'll take the edge off his work. He was always afraid that was what was going to happen to himself. In 1913 he made six thousand pounds—think on it, Mother, six thousand pounds in one year painting pictures! He said that was the writing on the wall for him; he said it was as much as Torrington made in all his life and he lived beyond eighty. 'And I'm not fit to tie Torrington's shoelace, Auntie.' I laughed at that, of course, but he was not a man to want butter. 'I mean it, my dear.' If he liked you he had a way of calling you 'my dear,' like one girl does to

another. 'Torrington was the only man that ever lived who could handle sunlight. That's the test for a painter. If I touch sunlight I burn holes in the canvas.' Of course, I laughed, but Stanning was a very humble chap when he talked about his own paintings."

Suddenly the Corporal realized that he had let his tongue run away with him, as it did sometimes. Melia was getting drowsy. He got up, therefore, and stretched his legs on the soft turf and then he said, "Let us go across to the Corfield Arms and see if we can get a cup of tea. And then if you feel up to it we'll walk through the Glade as far as Dibley and look at the house that Torrington lived in."

XXX

THEY went across to the Corfield Arms. It was an old, romantic looking inn, spoiled a little in these later days by contiguity to a great hive of commerce. But there were occasions, even now, when it retained something of the halo of ancient peace it was wont to bear; and the afternoon being Friday was an off day for visitors. When Bill and Melia passed through the bowling green at the back of the house to the arbor where last they had sat in the days of their courtship they found it empty.

In the garden by the arbor an old man was plucking raspberries. He turned out to be the landlord, and to the secret gratification of Melia he addressed Bill as "sir," out of deference to his uniform. Upon receiving the Corporal's commands he called loudly for "Polly."

In two shakes of a duck's tail Polly appeared: a blithe beauty in a clean lilac print dress, a little shrunk in the wash, which showed to advantage the lovely lines of her shape and the slender stem of a brown but classic neck in which a nest of red-gold hair hung loose. The Corporal ordered a royal repast for two persons; a pot of tea, boiled eggs, bread and butter,

cake, and a little of the honey for which the house used to be famous.

While they waited for the tea, the Corporal gave the old chap a hand with the raspberries. "Happen you remember Torrington, the artist who lived up at Dibley?"

"Aye." The old man remembered him without difficulty. "Knew him well when I was young. Soft Jack we used to call him; an old man and just a bit touched like as I remember him. Long beard he had and blue eyes—wonderful blue eyes had that old feller. Out painting in the open all day long, in all weathers. I used to stand for hours and watch him. He'd paint a bit, and then he'd paint it out, and then he'd paint it in again. 'Course he was clever, you know, in a manner of speaking. Nobody thought much of him then, but in these days, if you'll believe me, I've known people come specially from London to ask about him."

The Corporal turned to Melia with an air of discreet triumph. But Melia was so drowsy that she said she would go into the arbor until the tea came. She was encouraged to do so while the landlord went on, "I was a bit of a favorite with old Soft Jack. Many's the boy I've lammoxed for throwing stones at his easel. Of course, at the time I speak of, the old chap had got a bit tottery; he lived to be tight on ninety. But as I say nobody thought much of him, yet if you'll believe me it's only last year, or the year before last—

I'm getting on myself—that a college gentleman came down here to write a book about him. A very nice civil-spoken gentleman; but fancy writing a book about old Soft Jack!"

"Ever buy any of his pictures?"

"My father did. Gave as much as five pounds for one, more out of charity than anything, I've heard him say, but if you'll believe me when the old boy was dead my father sold that picture for twenty pounds, and they tell me—I've not seen it myself—that that picture is now in our Art Gallery, and the college gentleman I'm speaking of—I forget his name—says folk come from all parts of the world to look at it."

"Happen there was the sun in it," said the Corporal.

"Very like. Most of his pictures had the sun in 'em, what I remember. You know they do say that that old chap could look at the sun with the naked eye. And such an eye as it was—like an eagle's, even when he was old and past it."

"Got any of his pictures now?"

"Can't say I have. My father had one or two odd bits, but he sold 'em or gave 'em away. No good having a picture, I've heard the dad say, unless you've a frame to put it in. And frames was dear in those days. If you'll believe me, the frame often cost more than the picture."

"Pity you haven't one or two by you now. They do say all Torrington's pictures are worth a sight o' money."

"Shouldn't wonder. Money's more plentiful now than it used to be. My father was 'mazed when he got twenty pounds for the one he sold, and he heard afterwards it fetched as high as fifty. But I'm speaking, of course, of when the old man was dead. That reminds me, the old chap, being very hard up, painted our signboard. It wants a fresh coat now, but it's wonderful how it's lasted."

The Corporal, in his devotion to art, ceased to pick raspberries, and accompanied by his host, went to look at the expression of Soft Jack's genius upon the ancient front of the Corfield Arms. As they crossed the bowling green they came upon the smiling and gracious Polly, who bore a tea tray heavily laden.

"Lady's in the summerhouse." The gallant Corporal returned smile for smile. "Tell her to pour out the tea and I'll be along in a jiffy."

The signboard, after all, was not much to look at. The arms of the Corfields consisted in the main of a rampant unicorn, reft by the weather of a good deal of paint. But even here, by some miracle, the sunlight was shining on the noble horns of the fabulous animal, but whether the phenomenon was due to purely natural causes on this glorious afternoon of July, or whether the great artist was personally responsible for it was more than Corporal Hollis was able to say. It needed the trained eye of a Stanning, R.A., or of a young Nixey, the architect, to determine the point, but in the right-hand corner of the signboard

beyond a doubt, as the landlord was able to indicate with an air of pride, was Soft Jack's monogram, J. T.

Somehow the monogram saved the signboard itself from being a washout as a work of art, and the Corporal felt grateful for it as he returned to the arbor to drink tea with his wife, while the landlord, less of a critic, went back to the raspberries in his prolific garden.

CHAPTER XXXI

AFTER an excellent tea William and Melia went up the road to Dibley. It was two miles on and they took a path of classic beauty, fringed by a grove of elms in which the rooks were cawing, along a carpet of green bracken through which the lovely river wound. Dibley stood high, at the crest of a great clump of woodland, with the Sharrow silver-breasted below surging through a glorious valley.

It was getting on for twenty years since Bill had last handed Melia over the stile at the top of the glade, famous in song and story, and they had debouched arm in arm past the vicarage, along the bridle path, and had threaded their way through a nest of thatched cottages to the village green. The sun had now waned a little and the air had cooled on these shaded heights, the tea had been refreshing, and, for a few golden moments, inexpressibly sweet yet tragically fleeting, the courage of youth came back to them. Just beyond the parson's gate the Corporal stopped suddenly, took Melia in his arms and kissed her.

It was a sloppy thing to do, unworthy of old married people, but the guilt of the act was upon them, though neither knew exactly why it should have come about. They crossed the paddock and went on through

the romantic village, so sweetly familiar in its changelessness. It seemed but yesterday since they walked through it last.

"I've wondered sometimes," whispered the Corporal at the edge of the green, "what made you marry me?"

"I believed in you, Bill; I always believed in you." It was a great answer, yet somehow it was unexpected. In his heart he knew he was not worthy of it and that seemed to make it greater still.

Facing the duck pond, at the far end of the green, was the white cottage in which Torrington the artist had lived and died. It had changed a bit since his time. Things had been added by his more opulent successor. There were an iron gate, a considerable garden and a tall tower with a glass roof which nobly commanded the steep wooded slopes of the valley of the Sharrow.

With the new eyes a great painter had given him Bill saw at once that this was a rare pitch for an artist. It was one of the most beautiful spots in the land. The immense city of Blackhampton with its thousands of chimneys and its roaring factories might have been a hundred miles off instead of a bare four miles down the valley. There was not a glimpse or a sound of it here in this peace-haunted woodland, in this enchantment of stream and hill, bathed in a pomp of golden cloud and magic beauty.

The simple cottage had been modernized and am-

plified, but with rare tact and cunning, so that it was still "all of a piece," much as Torrington had left. But the house itself was empty, with green shutters across the windows. On the gate was a padlock, the reason for which was given in a printed bill stuck on a board that had been raised beside it.

By order of the executors of the late James Stanning, Esqre., A.R.A., to be sold by auction the valuable and historical property known as Torrington Cottage Dibley, together with the following furniture and effects.

A list followed of the furniture and effects, but across the face of the bill was pasted a diagonal red-lettered slip,

This property has been sold by private treaty.

The Corporal tried to open the gate but found the padlock unyielding, and then he gazed at the notice wistfully.

"Wonder who's bought it," he said.

Melia wondered too.

"Hope it's an artist," said the Corporal.

"So do I. But I expect it isn't. Artists is scarce."

"You're right, there." The Corporal sighed heavily. "Artists is scarce." There was a strange look in his eyes and he turned them suddenly upon the duck pond so that Melia shouldn't notice it.

Across the road, beside the duck pond, was a wooden bench, sacred to the village elders, none of whom, however, was in occupation at this moment. The

Corporal pointed to it. "Let's go an' set there a minute," he said in a husky voice. As if she had been a child he took her by the hand and led her to it.

They sat down and in a moment or two it was as if the spirit of the place had descended upon them. The magic hush of evening crept into their blood like a subtle wine. A strange soft rapture seemed to pervade the air. The Unseen spoke to them as never before.

The Corporal took off his hat and wiped the dew from his forehead. And then with a queer tightening of the throat and breast he scanned earth and sky. They seemed marvelous indeed. He felt them speak to him, to the infinite, submerged senses whose presence he had hardly suspected. Never had he experienced such awe as now in the presence of this peace that passed all understanding.

In a little while the silence of the Corporal began to trouble Melia. A cold hand crept into his. "What is it, love?" she said softly.

Not daring to look at her, he kept his eyes fixed on the sky.

"What is it, love—tell me?" He hardly knew the voice for hers; not until that moment had he heard her use it; but it had the power to ease just a little the intolerable pressure of his thoughts.

"I was wondering," he said slowly, at last, "whether it would not have been better never to have been born."

She shivered, not at his words, but at the gray look on his face.

"Stanning said the night before he went he thought that taking it altogether it would have been better if there had never been a human race at all. I'll never forget that last talk with him, not if I live to be a hundred—which I shall not." The Corporal had begun to think his thoughts aloud. "You see, he knew then that his number was up. I can see him settin' there, Mother, just as you are now, lookin' at that old sunset, his back to that old canal—the Yser, I think they call it—an' stinkin' it was, fair cruel. 'Auntie,' he said suddenlike, 'tell me what brought you into this?' I said, 'No, boy'—just like a child he was as he set there—'it's for me to ask *you* that question. You're a big gun, you know, a shining light; I'm a never-was-er.' That seemed to make him laugh; he was one that could always raise a laugh, even when he felt most solemn. 'I come of a long stock of high-nosed old Methodists,' he said. 'Always made a thing they call Conscience their watchword and fetish. There was a Stanning went to the stake for it in the time of Bloody Mary; there was another helped Oliver Cromwell to cut the head off King Charles. A poisonous, uncomfortable crowd, and all my life they've seemed to come back and worry me just at the times I should have been most pleased to do without them. People talk about free will—but there isn't such a thing, my dear.'

"I allowed that there wasn't in my case. Then I told him about Troop Sergeant Major Hollis, who fought at Waterloo. 'Yes,' he said, 'yours is an old name in the city, older than mine, I dare say.' 'Well,' I said, 'according to Bazeley's Annals there was a William Hollis who was mayor of the borough in the year of the Spanish Armada.' 'Good for you, Auntie,' he said, chaffing-like; he was a rare one for chaff. 'One up to you. Then,' he said, 'there was William Hollis who was "some" poet in the eighteenth century, who wrote the famous romantic poem, "The Love Lorn Lady of Corfield." Still,' he said, 'these things don't explain you dragging your old bones to rot out here.' 'They do in a way, though,' I said. 'When we come up against a big thing it isn't us that really matters, it's what's at the back of us. I used to set in my old garden on The Rise,' I said, 'in those early days when those dirty dogs opposite was just beginning to wipe their feet on Europe. And I said to myself, Bill Hollis, how would *you* like it if they broke through the fence into your garden, trampling your young seeds and goose-stepping all over your roses and your tulips. And I tell you, Jim—we got to be very familiar those last few weeks—it used to make me fair mad to read in the *Tribune* what they'd done . . . Louvain one time . . . Termondy another . . . et cetera. . . . And I kept on settin' there day after day, in my old garden on the top o' The Rise, saying to myself, Hollis, it's no use, me lad, you're go-

ing into this. You've failed in every bloody thing so far, and if you take on this you'll not be man enough to stick it out. War isn't thinking, it's doing, and you've never been a doer, you've not. Then I read in the *Tribune* one morning that they'd got Antwerp and I said to myself, I can't stand this no more. And I went right away to the Duke of Wellington and had a liquor up—but only a mild one, you know—and then round the corner to the Recruiting Office and gave my age as thirty-six and here I am admiring this bleeding sunset with the eye of an artist.'

"That made him laugh some more. 'Well, Auntie,' he said, 'I'm very proud to have known you and I hope you'll do me the honor of accepting this as a keepsake.' He unbuttoned his greatcoat and took this old watch out of his tunic."

The Corporal paused an instant in his story to follow the example of his friend. He produced an old-fashioned gold hunting watch, with J. T. in monogram at the back, and handed it to Melia.

"It's a rare good one, Mother," the Corporal's voice was very low, "solid gold." He opened the lid and showed her the inscription:

To John Torrington, Esquire, from a Humble Admirer of His Genius, 1859.

"Stanning said, 'I had the luck to buy that in a pawnshop in Blackhampton long after he was dead, and if I had had a boy of my own I should like him

to have kept it as an heirloom, but as I have not I want you to take it, Auntie, because I know you'll appreciate it.' Somehow, I could tell from the way he spoke that he was done. I hadn't the heart to refuse it, although I hadn't a boy or a girl of my own neither." A huskiness in the Corporal's throat made it hard to go on for a moment. "'I'm only thirty-nine,' he said, 'and all the best is in me. I don't fancy having my light put out like this in a wet bog, but it's got to come, my dear. I hate to think that sometime to-morrow I shall be as if I had never been.' 'Not you,' I said. 'You're sickening for the fever.' But I couldn't move him. He'd got the hoo-doo. 'No use talking about it,' he said, 'but you and I'll never have that day's fishing in Corfield Weir. I should like you to have seen my cottage up at Dibley. It's got the ghost of that old boy.' He put his hand on the watch, Mother, just like this. 'If there is a heaven for dead painters, and I doubt it, I'd like to sit in John Torrington's corner on his right hand. You see, I've learned all sorts of things, living in his house. I was getting to know the lights on the Sharrow and the feel of the clouds—in all the great Torringtons the clouds feel like velvet—and he was going to show me the way to handle sunlight—I've already been twice across to New York to see "An Afternoon in July in the Valley of the Sharrow," the most wonderful thing of its kind in existence. You get the view from my cottage—his cottage—at Dibley. I should like you

to have seen it, Auntie. And then I should like to have taken you across to New York to show you what old John made of it. Fancy having to go all the way to New York to look at it. So like us to be caught on the hop, in the things that really matter.' I give you my word, Mother, he raised a laugh even then, but of a sudden his voice went all queer-like. 'However,' he said, 'there's a Mind in this that knows more than we do.' Then the lad began to shiver just as if he had the ague. And the next day, about the same time, or mayhap the perishin' old sun had gone a bit more west, I had to go out across No Man's Land to bring him in . . . what there was left of him."

The Corporal ended his strange story as if after all it didn't much matter. He was quite impersonal, but Melia sat beside him shivering at the look in his eyes. Never before had the veil been torn aside in this way. She was a dull soul, fettered heavily by her limitations, but sitting there in the growing dusk it came on her almost with horror that in all those long years it was the first peep she had had behind the scenes of his mind. She hadn't realized the kind of man he was. More than once she had cast it in his face that he was an idle shack-about. Somehow, there had been nothing to give her the key to him; and now, miraculously as it seemed, it had come to her, it was too late.

She had the key to him now. But the sands were running out in fate's hour glass. She couldn't bear to look at his thin gray face as the light fell on it, nor at

his strange eyes fixed on the padlocked gate of the cottage opposite. Of a sudden the watch slipped from her shaking hands, and fell lightly in a little brake of thistles by the end of the bench on which they sat.

Cautiously and carefully he picked it out. "Take care on it, Mother," he said softly as he put it again in her hands. "I wish we'd a little boy as could have had it. However, we've not. There was once a George Hollis who was an artist; I showed you that picture of his, "The Glade above Corfield," the other day; Jim said it was a good one. John Torrington one time was his pupil. Don't suppose he was any relation but it's the same name."

Melia put the watch in the pretty leather bag he had insisted on buying for her. And then she said with a horrible clutch in her throat: "Bill, promise! You'll come back . . . won't you?"

His eyes didn't move.

"I'll be that lonely."

He sighed softly like a child who is very tired. "I'll do what I can, Mother." The voice was gentleness itself. "I can't do more."

She didn't know . . . she didn't realize . . . what . . . she . . . was . . .

XXXII

THEY sat hand in hand on the bench by the duck pond until the shadows began to lengthen along the valley of the Sharrow. For quite a long time they didn't speak, but at last their reverie was broken by the sight of a dusty figure with a sack on its back shambling along the road towards them. It was the village postman.

"Who's bought the cottage opposite?" the Corporal asked.

"Zur?" said the postman.

The Corporal repeated his question.

"They do sey, zur," said the postman in slow, impressive Doric, "the Mayor o' Blackhampton has bought it."

"What—Alderman Munt?" The voice of the Corporal was full of dismay.

"The Mayor o' Blackhampton, zur. Come here the other day in a motey car to look at it. Large big genelman in a white hat."

The heart of the Corporal sank. What the hell had he, of all people, to go buying it for! Somehow the postman had shattered the queer sad little world in which they sat. A feeling of desperation came suddenly upon the Corporal. He rose abruptly from

the bench. "Come on, Mother," he said, "if we don't get along we'll be late for supper."

"Don't want no supper, Bill."

But the Corporal was firm.

"I'd like to stop here all night," Melia said as she rose limply from the bench. "I'd like to stop here forever."

That was the desire uppermost in the Corporal also, but it would not do to admit it.

Down the road, hand in hand, like two children out late, they trudged in the gathering dusk to Corfield. It was a perfect evening. Just a little ahead was one faint star; over to the left in the noble line of woods that overlooked the river they could hear the nightingale. Once they stopped and held their breaths to listen. They saw the rabbits dart from among the ferns at their feet and run before them along the white road. The evening pressed ever closer upon them as they marched slowly on, until, at a turn in the road, Corfield with its fruit orchards came into view.

It was a long trek home but they were in no hurry to get there. By the time they had come to the old stone bridge which spanned the broad river and united the country with the town it was quite dark and the lamps of the city were shining in the distance.

Midway across the bridge they stopped to take one last look at the Sharrow gleaming down its valley.

Since the afternoon this mighty symbol which from earliest childhood had dominated their every recollection seemed to have gained in power, in magic and in mystery.

XXXIII

THE hard and difficult months wore on. Summer passed to autumn; Europe was locked in the most terrible conflict the world had ever seen, but there was no sign of a decision.

Like Britain herself, Blackhampton was in the war to the last man and the last shilling. From the moment the plunge had been taken the conscience and the will of this brotherhood of free peoples had been in grim unison behind the action of its government. The war was no affair of sections or of classes; the issue was so clear that there was no ground for misunderstanding it.

For years it had been freely declared that Britain was past her zenith, that disintegration had already begun, that England herself was enervated with prosperity. At the outset the enemy in making war had counted on the fact too confidently. Britain would not dare to enter the struggle, she who was suffering from fatty degeneration of the soul, or if in the end she was driven into the whirlpool in spite of herself she would prove a broken reed in this strife for human freedom.

These were dangerous heresies, even for a race of supermen, and nowhere in the oldest of free communities was the task of dispelling it undertaken more vigorously than in Blackhampton. As its archives bore witness it had a long and proud record. No matter what great national movement had been afoot in the past, Blackhampton, the central city of England, geographically speaking, had invariably reacted to it with force and urgency.

Among the many virile men who strove to meet a supreme occasion, none deserved better of his country, or of his fellow citizens than Mr. Josiah Munt. He was of a type suited beyond all others to deal with the more obvious needs of a time that called for the unsparing use of every energy; he had a genius of a plain, practical, ruthless kind; he was the incarnation of "carry-on" and "get things done."

From the first hour he took off his coat and buckled to. He worked like a leviathan. No day was too long for him, no labor too arduous; his methods were rough and now and again the clatter he made was a little out of proportion to the amount of weight he pulled in the boat. His life had been one of limited opportunity, but he had a knack of seeing the thing to be done and of doing it. People soon began to realize that he was the right man in the right place, and that as a driving force he was a great asset to the city of Blackhampton.

The war was about fifteen months' old when Alder-

man Munt was chosen mayor of Blackhampton. He took up an office that was by no means a sinecure at a very critical moment. But it was soon clear that a wise choice had been made; a certain Britishness of character of the right bull-dog breed did much to keep a population of two hundred and eighty-six thousand souls "up to the collar." Somehow, the rude force and the native honesty of the man appealed to the popular imagination; if a prophet is ever honored in his own country it is in time of war.

During his mayoralty Josiah Munt came to occupy a place in the minds of his own people that none could have predicted. When the grim hour struck which altered the face of the world and changed the whole aspect of human society few could have been found to say a word in favor of the proprietor of the Duke of Wellington. He had begun low down, in a common part of the town; and, although there was really nothing against him, his name was never in specially good odor, perhaps for the reason that he bore obvious marks of his origin and because the curves of his mind were too broad for him to care very much about concealing them. In the general opinion he had been a very "lucky" man, financially successful beyond his merits, and for that reason arrogant. But in the throes of the upheaval preconceived ideas were soon shed if they did not happen to square with the facts; and it took considerably less than a year for Josiah to prove to his fellow townsmen that the god-

dess Fortune is not always the capricious fool she has the name of being.

Even in the stress of a terribly strenuous twelve months the Mayor of Blackhampton, like the wise man he was, insisted upon taking his annual fortnight's holiday at Bridlington. He had not missed his annual fortnight at Bridlington once in the last thirty years. It did him so much good, he was able to work so much the better for it afterwards, that, as he informed Mr. Aylett the Town Clerk, on the eve of departure in the second week of August, "it would take more than the likes o' the Kaiser to keep him from the seaside."

Like a giant refreshed the Mayor returned to his civic duties at the end of the month. His leisure at Bridlington had been enlivened by the company of the Mayoress, by Mrs. Doctor Cockburn and her two children, and also by Miss Gertrude Preston, who for quite a number of years now had helped to beguile the tedium of her brother-in-law's annual rest cure.

As soon as the Mayor returned to the scene of his labors he found there was one very important question he would have to decide. In his absence the City fathers had met several times to discuss the matter of his successor and had come, in some cases perhaps reluctantly, to the conclusion that none but himself could be his peer. According to the aldermanic roster, Mr. Limpenny the maltster was next in office, but that wise man was the first to own that he had not the

driving power, or the breadth of appeal of the present mayor.

In ordinary times that would not have mattered, but the times were very far from ordinary. War was making still sterner demands, week by week, upon every man and woman in the country. Blackhampton had done much, as every town in England had, but its temporal directors felt that no effort must be relaxed, and that it was ever increasingly their duty "to keep it up to the collar." And Josiah Munt now filled the popular mind.

The very qualities which in the gentler days, not so long ago, had aroused antagonism were at a premium now. For superfine people the Mayor was a full-blooded representative of a distressing type, but it was now the reign of King Demos: all over the island from Westminster itself to the parish hall of Little Pedlington-in-the-Pound the Josiah Munts of the earth had come at last by their own. On every public platform and in every newspaper was to be found a Josiah Munt haranguing the natives at the top of his voice, thereby guaranteeing his political vision and his mental capacity. King Demos is not a rose born to blush unseen; he knows everything about everything and he is not ashamed to say so. With a fraction of his colossal mind he can conduct the most delicate and far-reaching military operations, involving millions of men, and countless tons of machinery to which even a Napoleon or a Clausewitz might be expected to give

his undivided attention; with another he is able to insure that the five million dogs of the island, mainly untaxed, shall continue to pollute the unscavengered streets of its most populous cities; with another he is able to devise a Ministry of Health; with another he can pick his way through the maze of world politics, and recast the map of Europe and Asia on a basis to endure until the crack of doom; with yet another he can devise a new handle for the parish pump.

King Demos is indeed a bright fellow. And in Mr. Josiah Munt he found an ideal representative. Happily for Blackhampton, although there were places of even greater importance who in this respect were not so well off, he was a man of rude honesty. He said what he meant and he meant what he said; he was no believer in graft, he did not willfully mislead; he was not a seeker of cheap applause; and in matters of the public purse he had a certain amount of public conscience. As Mr. Aylett the town clerk said in the course of a private conversation with Mr. Druce the chairman of the Finance Committee, "His worship is not everybody's pretty boy, but just now we are lucky to have him and we ought to be thankful that he is the clean potato."

Therefore, within a week of his return from Bridlington, the Mayor was met by the request of the City fathers that he should take office for another year. Josiah was flattered by the compliment, but he felt

that it was not a matter he could decide offhand. "He must talk to the wife."

At dinner that evening at Strathfieldsaye, when the question was mooted, the hapless Maria was overcome. Only heaven knew, if heaven did know, how she had contrived to fill the part of a Mayoress for so many trying months. She had simply been counting the days when she could retire into that life of privacy, from which by no desire of her own had she emerged. It was too cruel that the present agony should be prolonged for another year, and although her tremulous lips dare not say so her eyes spoke for her.

"What do you say, Mother?" His worship proudly took a helping of potatoes.

Maria did not say anything.

"A compliment, you know. Limpenny's next in, but the Council is unanimous in asking me to keep on. I don't know that I want to, it's terrible work, great responsibility and it costs money; but, between you and me, I don't see who is going to do it better. Comes to that, I don't see who is going to do it as well. Limpenny's a gentleman and all that, college bred and so on, but he's not the man somehow. Give Limpenny his due, he knows that. He button-holed me this morning after the meeting of the Council. 'Mr. Mayor,' he said—Limpenny's one o' those precise think-before-you-speak sort o' people—'I do hope you'll continue in office. To my mind you're the right

man in the right place.' I thought that very decent of Limpenny. Couldn't have spoken fairer, could he?"

The hapless Maria gave an audible sniff and discontinued the eating of war beef.

"Well, Mother, what do you say? The Council seems to think that I've got the half nelson on this town. So Aylett said. A bit of a wag in his way, is that Aylett. He said I'd got two hundred and eighty-six thousand people feeding from the hand. That's an exaggeration, but I see what he means; and he's a man of considerable municipal experience. Smartest town clerk in England, they tell me. 'It's all very well, Mr. Aylett,' I said, 'but I'll have to talk to the Mayoress. And I'll let you have an answer to-morrow.' "

The hapless Maria declined gooseberry fool proffered by the respectful Alice.

"Don't seem to be eating, Mother," said his worship. "Aren't you well? I expect it's the weather."

Maria thought it must be the weather; at any rate it could be nothing else.

"Want a bit more air, I think," said Josiah in the midst of a royal helping of a favorite delicacy. "Just roll back those sunblinds, Alice, and let in a bit o' daylight."

The sphinx-like Alice carried out the order.

"And open the doors a bit wider."

Alice impassively obeyed.

"Would you like a nip of brandy? The weather, I suppose. Very hot to-day. Temperature nearly a hundred this morning in the Council Chamber. We'll have some new ventilators put in there or I'll know the reason. At the best of times there's a great deal too much hot air in the Council Chamber. And when you get a hot summer on the top of it . . . ! Alice, go and get some brandy for the Mistress."

Exit Alice.

"You'll feel better when you've had a drop of brandy. Antiquated things those ventilators at the City Hall. Aylett thinks they've been there since the time of Queen Anne. But they're not the only things I'm going to scrap if I hold office another year. There's too much flummery and red tape round about Corporation Square. Tradition is all very well but we want something practical."

Alice entered with a decanter.

"Ah, that'll put you right. A little meat for the Mistress, Alice. Never mind the soda. It'll not hurt you, Mother. Prime stuff is that and prime stuff never does harm to no one. Some I've had by me at the Duke of Wellington for many a year."

At first the Mayoress was very shy of the brandy, prime stuff though it was, but his worship was adamant, and after a moment or two of half-hearted resistance Maria seemed the better for her lord's inflexibility.

"Talkin' of the Duke of Wellington . . . funny

how things work out! When we went in there in '79, you and me, we little thought we should be where we are now, in the most important time in history. That reminds me. Alice, just ring up the *Tribune* Office and give the editor my compliments and tell him I've arranged to speak to-morrow at the Gas Works at twelve o'clock and they had better send a reporter."

"Very good, sir."

"Alice!"

Alice halted sphinx-like at the door.

"Wait a minute. I'll go myself!" Josiah plucked his table napkin out of his collar. "Nothing like doing a thing while it's fresh in your mind. And do it yourself if you want it done right. I must have a word with Parslow the editor. The jockey he sent to Jubilee Park to report the flower show didn't know his business. The most important part of the speech was left out." He laid down his table napkin and rose determinedly. "Nice thing in a time like this for the Mayor of the City not to be fully reported. I've half a mind to tell that Parslow what I think of him. Some people don't seem to know there's a war on."

Five minutes later when Josiah returned in triumph to his gooseberries he found Maria reclining on the sofa with her feet up, next the window opening on to the spacious lawns of Strathfieldsaye. The impassive but assiduous handmaid was fanning her mistress with a handkerchief.

"That's right, Alice!" Josiah sat down with an air of satisfaction. He was not indifferent to the sufferings of Maria, but of recent years she seemed to have developed a susceptibility to climatic conditions perhaps a little excessive for the wife of one who at heart was still a plain man. She had a proneness to whims and fancies now which in robuster days was lacking. He could only ascribe it to a kind of misplaced fineladyism, and he didn't quite approve it.

"I spoke pretty straight to the *Tribune* . . . to the subeditor. I said I hoped they fully realized their duty to the public and also to the Empire, but that I sometimes doubted it. He seemed a bit huffed, I thought . . . but you'll see I'll be reported to-morrow all right. I'll look after your mistress, Alice. Go and get the coffee."

When Alice returned with the coffee she found the Mayor vigorously fanning the Mayoress with a table napkin, and she was peremptorily ordered "to nip upstairs for a bottle of sal volatile."

XXXIV

THERE was honest satisfaction in the town when it was known that the Mayor had consented to remain another year in office. Most people agreed that it was a good thing for Blackhampton. But the Mayoress took to her bed.

Could she have had her way she would never have got up again. For many years now life had been a nightmare of ever-growing duties, of ever-increasing responsibilities. Her conservative temperament resisted change. She had not wanted to leave the Duke of Wellington for the comparative luxury of Waterloo Villa, she had not wanted to leave Waterloo Villa for the defiant grandeur of Strathfieldsaye. When she was faced with a whole year as Mayoress she fully expected to die of it, and perhaps she would have died of it but for the oblique influence of Gertrude Preston; but now she was threatened with a further twelve-months of the same embarrassing public grandeur she was compelled to review her attitude towards an early demise.

Maria knew that if she allowed her light to be put out Gerty had the makings of a highly qualified successor. No one was better at shaking hands with a

grandee, no one had a happier knack of saying the right word at the right time; and neither the Mayor nor the Mayoress, particularly the latter, knew what they would have done without her. Gerty, in fact, had become a kind of unofficial standard bearer and henchwoman of a great man. Every piece of gossip she heard about him was faithfully reported, every paragraph that appeared in the paper was brought to his notice, she flattered him continually and made him out to be no end of a fellow; and in consequence poor Maria was bitten with such a furious jealousy that she would like to have killed her designing but indispensable step-sister.

When Maria took to her bed, the Mayor promptly requested the accomplished Gertrude to do what she could in the matter.

"Josiah, she must show Spirit." As always that was her specific for the hapless Maria, and at the request of his worship she went at once to the big bedroom, from whose large bay windows a truly noble view of the whole city and the open country beyond was to be obtained, and as Josiah himself expressed it, "proceeded to read the riot act to the Mayoress."

The Mayoress was in bed, therefore she had to take it lying down. For that matter it was her nature to take all things lying down. But in her heart she had never so deeply resented the obtrusion of Gerty as at this moment. She wanted never to get up any more, but if she didn't get up any more this meddle-

some and dangerous rival would do as she liked with Josiah, and in all human probability as soon as the lawful Mayoress was decently and comfortably in her grave she would marry him.

It was really Gerty who kept the Mayoress going; not by the crude method of personal admonition, however forcible its use, but by the subtle spur that one mind may exert upon another. Maria had to choose between showing spirit and allowing the odious Gerty to wear the dubious mantle of her grandeur.

Hard was the choice, but Mother Eve prevailed in the weak flesh of the lawful Mayoress. She made a silent vow that Gerty should not marry Josiah if she could possibly help it. Yes, she would show spirit. Cruel as the alternative was, she would be Mayoress a second year. Even if she died of it, and in her present frame of mind she rather hoped she would, she alone should sit in the chair of honor at the Annual Meeting of the British Women's Tribute to the Memory of Queen Boadicea, she alone should take precedence of the local duchess and the county ladies at the annual bazaar in aid of the Society for Providing Black and White Dogs with Brown Biscuits.

Maria, however, in her present low state, consented to Gerty deputizing for her at the review of the Girl Scouts in the Arboretum. She was reluctant to make even that minor concession—it was the thin end of the wedge!—but it had been intimated to Josiah that the Mayoress was always expected to say a few words

on this spirited occasion. This was altogether too much for Maria in the present condition of her health.

Before the Girl Scouts, Gerty bore herself in a manner that even Miss Heber-Knollys, the august principal of the High School for Young Ladies, who was present, a perfect dragon of silent criticism, could hardly have improved upon. The Mayor at any rate was delighted with his sister-in-law's performance, drove her back in triumph to Strathfieldsaye and insisted on her staying to dinner.

The hapless Maria, after nearly three weeks of the peace and sanctity of her chamber, had struggled down to tea for the first time. She sat forlornly in the drawing-room, a white woolen shawl over her ample shoulders. It had been a real relief to allow Gerty to deputize for her, but now that the hour of trial was past Maria was inclined to despise, for the moment at any rate, the human weakness that had played into the hands of a highly dangerous schemer. It would have been so easy to have done it oneself, after all; it was such a simple thing, now that it was safely over!

Gerty consumed a pickelet and drank two cups of tea with an air of rectitude, while Josiah recited the story of the afternoon for the delectation of Maria. He was so well satisfied with the performance of the deputy that the lawful Mayoress began to scent danger. "Gert says," the Mayor informed her, "that if you don't feel up to it she'll distribute the prizes on the Fifth, at the Floral Hall."

The Mayoress drew in her lips, a sign that she was thinking. She *might* be able to manage the Fifth, as "a few words" were not expected, although, of course, they were always welcome.

Josiah, however, was not inclined to press the matter. Maria seemed rather worried by her duties as Mayoress and Gerty having had greater experience in that kind of thing and having already done extremely well in the Arboretum, it now occurred to the Mayor that it might be possible to arrange with the Town Clerk for her to take over the duties permanently in his second year of office. "I don't say the Council will consent," said Josiah. "It may be a bit irregular. But they know you're not strong, Mother. I was careful to tell them that when I consented to keep the job on. So the way is paved for you, as you might say, if you really don't feel up to it. Anyhow, I'll hear what Aylett has to say about it. No man in England, they tell me, is a safer guide in matters of municipal practice. If Aylett thinks it will be all right, I'm sure Gerty won't mind acting as Mayoress."

"Delighted, Josiah!" Gerty's bow and smile were positively regal; they were modeled, in point of fact, upon those of Princess Mawdwin of Connemara, the most celebrated bazaar-opener of the period.

The Mayoress drew in her lips still further. She began to think very seriously. No human Mayoress could have been in lower spirits or have felt less equal to her duties than did Maria at that moment, but if

Gerty was allowed to usurp the honors and the dignities so undubitably hers it would be very hard to bear. The whole thing was so like Gerty. Always a schemer; in spite of her soft manners and her pussy-cat ways, always at heart a grabber. The Mayoress felt that if the weak state of her health called for a deputy, and really it seemed to do so, she would have preferred the Queen of Sheba herself to the designing Gertrude. For years she had been able to twist Josiah round her little finger. So like a man to be taken in by her! So like a man not to be able to see what a Fox of a woman she really was.

Unfortunately Maria had reason to fear that she was very ill, indeed. She was afraid of her heart. It is true that three times within the past fortnight Horace, Doctor Cockburn, had solemnly assured his mother-in-law that there was nothing the matter with it. But thinking the matter over, as day after day she lay in her miserable bed, she had come to the conclusion that Horace was a modern doctor and that a modern doctor could hardly be expected to understand that old-fashioned organ, the heart.

She had made up her mind, therefore, to have a second opinion. She would go to a heart specialist, a man who really knew about hearts. As a fact she had already made up her mind to have the opinion of Dr. Tremlett who humored her, who understood her system and its ways. Horace, who was so modern, rather smiled at Dr. Tremlett—he was careful not to

go beyond a smile at Doctor Tremlett, although his demeanor almost suggested that he might have done so had not etiquette intervened.

The Mayoress, therefore, was now placed in a difficult position by the success of a base intriguer. She didn't know what to do. Three days ago her mind had been made up that she would put herself in the hands of Doctor Tremlett, but if she did that she was quite sure that Doctor Tremlett, a physician of the old school who knew how important the heart was in every human anatomy and therefore treated it with the utmost respect, would not allow her to go overdoing it. Her time would be divided between her bed and the drawing-room sofa; he would most probably insist on a trained nurse—Doctor Tremlett really respected the heart—and the trained nurse would mean, of course, that the Mayoress had abdicated and that the way was open for the treacherous Gertrude with her pussy-cat ways to take over the duties permanently.

It was a dilemma. And it was made needlessly painful for the Mayoress by the blindness and folly of the Mayor; in some ways so very able, in others he was such a shortsighted man! Really, he ought to have seen what Gerty was up to. So like a man to be completely taken in by her. One of her own sex would have seen at a glance that Gertrude was a Deep one.

It was a most difficult moment for the Mayoress.

Either she must be false to Doctor Tremlett and give up her heart or she would have to submit tamely to the rape of her grandeur and have it flaunted in her face by a Designing creature. Heaven knew that she had no taste herself for grandeur, but Gerty had a very decided taste for it and there was the rub!

"Have a piece of this excellent pickelet, Josiah!" That smile and that manner were very winning to some eyes no doubt, but those of Maria were not of the number. That coat and skirt, how well they hung upon her! Gerty had always had a slim figure. Some people thought her figure very genteel, but again Maria was not of the number. Some people also thought her voice was very ladylike—Josiah did for one. La-di-da the Mayoress called it. Simpering creature! Even if the pickelet was excellent it didn't need her to say so. What had she to do with the pikelet? And there was Josiah submitting to her like a lamb and talking to her about the Town Clerk and the City Council and wondering whether she would mind giving him a hand on the Fifth at the Floral Hall.

"I'll be delighted, Josiah—simply delighted. Anything to help. If I can be the slightest use to you—and to Maria."

That precious, "And to Maria," brought a curl to the lip of the lawful Mayoress. Designing hussy! So like a man not to see through her. Maria felt herself slowly turning green. The heart has been known to take people that way.

"Gert is staying to dinner, Mother. Hope Billing sent up that salmon."

Billing had sent up the salmon, the Mayor was meekly informed by the Mayoress.

"Chose it myself. Looked a good fish."

"It is wonderful to me, Josiah"—affected mouncing minx!—"how you manage to get through your day. You seem to have time for everything. Why, your work as mayor alone would keep most people fully occupied. Yet you always seem able to attend personally to this and that and the other."

"Oh, I don't know, Gert." Some of the great man's critics were inclined to think that since he had made so good in his high office his amazing self-confidence had abated a feather or two. "I've always tried to be what I call a prattical man. If you want a thing done right do it yourself—that's my motto."

"But you get through so much, Josiah."

"Just a habit. But there's a very busy year ahead. Being Mayor o' this city is not child's play in times like these. We're up against the food shortage now. Last year it was munitions. Next year it'll be coal. And the Army's always crying out for men. And any labor that isn't in khaki is that durned independent and very inefficient into the bargain. The papers are always writing up what they call democracy. Well, you can have all my share of democracy. Between you and me, Gert, it's mainly a name for a lot of jumped-up ignoramuses who have no idea of how lit-

tle they do know. Yesterday I was over at Cleveley arranging with the Duke about a certain matter. Now he's prattical fellow, is that. He said, 'Mr. Munt, to be candid, I don't know anything about the subject, but I'm very willing to learn.' I tell you, Gert, you'd have to wait till the cows come home to hear one of our jumped-up Jacks-in-Office talking that way. There's nothing they don't know and they're not afraid to say so. Why, it even takes *me* all my time to tell them anything."

XXXV

AT this critical moment Ethel came in. Mrs. Doctor Cockburn was raging secretly. She had turned up at the Arboretum, dutifully prepared to help her mother through a situation a little trying perhaps to the nerve of inexperience and behold! there was Gertrude, smiling and pat, going through it all without turning a hair and palpably not in need of the least assistance from any one. The mortified Ethel, having missed a Sunday at Strathfieldsaye, had not been in a position to realize that her mother was going to be so weak as to allow Gerty, who as usual had masked her intentions very cleverly, to take her place. It was such a pity! Miss Heber-Knollys who was there, had said it was such a pity!

Ethel, an old and successful pupil of that distinguished lady, had been carried off to tea by her at the end of the proceedings. And Miss Heber-Knollys had expressed herself as a little disappointed. She was sure the Girl Scouts had been so looking forward to having the Mayoress with them that afternoon; at any rate, Miss Heber-Knollys had, although of course she had no pretensions to speak for the Girl Scouts; but speaking as a public, a semi-public woman of Blackhampton, although born in Kent and edu-

cated at Girham, speaking, therefore, as a quasi-public and naturalized woman of Blackhampton with an M.A. degree, she looked to the Mayoress to take a strong lead in all matters relating to the many-sided activities of the City's feminine life.

Ethel quite saw that. And she now proceeded fully and pointedly to report Miss Heber-Knollys for the future guidance of her father, the admonition of her mother and for the confusion and general undoing of the designing Gertrude. Mrs. Doctor Cockburn was far from realizing the critical nature of the moment at which she had chanced to arrive, but the general effect of her presence was just as stimulating as if she had. The lawful Mayoress was in sore need of mental and moral support if she was to prevail against the Schemer.

Ethel was in the nick of time, but yet it was by no means certain that she was not too late to keep Gerty from the Floral Hall. The Floral Hall would depend on Doctor Tremlett, bluntly remarked Josiah.

"Doctor Tremlett!" said Mrs. Doctor Cockburn sternly.

"Your man has got the sack." The Mayor indulged in an obvious wink at Gerty who was looking as if butter would not melt in her mouth.

"But," said the horrified Ethel, "there's no comparison between Horace and Doctor Tremlett. Horace belongs to the modern school; Doctor Tremlett's an old fossil."

"Your Ma seems to think Doctor Tremlett understands her," said Josiah bluntly. "And Doctor Tremlett says she's got to be very careful of her heart or she'll have to lie up and have a trained nurse."

"But Horace declares there is nothing the matter with it."

"That's where Horace don't know his business as well as Doctor Tremlett. Your Ma has got to be very careful, indeed, and I'm going to arrange with Aylett for her to have a deputy for the whole of the coming year. You see if anything happened to her she'd *have* to have a deputy, so it may be wise to take steps beforehand."

"Nonsense, Father! Horace says there's nothing the matter with her. He says it's stage fright. You ought not to encourage her. Certainly it isn't right that Gerty should be taking her place. Miss Heber-Knollys says it may make a bad impression."

"Don't know, I'm sure, what business it is of hers." His worship spoke with considerable asperity.

"Besides, if any one must deputize, surely it should be me."

There was a little pause and then said Gerty in her meek and dovelike voice, "We all thought, dear, that just now you would not care to take part in a public display. Perhaps after Christmas . . . when the new little one has safely arrived."

The other ladies realized that the Fox of a Gertrude had scored a bull's-eye. At Christmas it was fond-

ly hoped in the family that the Mayor would at last have a grandson. Certainly, Mrs. Doctor could not be expected to take an active part at the Floral Hall.

There were occasions, however, when Mrs. Doctor was visited by some of her father's driving force and power of will. And this was one of them. If a calamity of the first magnitude was to be averted—Gerty as Deputy-Mayoress was unthinkable!—there must be no half measure. "Horace says it will do Mother good to distribute the prizes at the Floral Hall, and if she doesn't I am sure that quite a lot of people will be disappointed."

Even for Ethel this was rather cynical. She was well aware that she had greatly overrated the public's power of disappointment; at the same time it was clearly a case for strong action. "You'll go to the Floral Hall, Mother. And I'll come with you."

"*You,* dear?" Gerty spoke in a melodramatic whisper.

"I shall sit just behind her . . . in the second row. We can't have people talking. And I shall put on my fur coat."

It was a blow on the sconce for the specious Gertrude, but she took it with disarming meekness, smiling, as Ethel mentally described her, "like a prize Angora" down her long, straight, rather adventurous nose.

"It's your duty, Mother." Mrs. Doctor proceeded to administer a mental and moral shaking. "The

women of the city look up to you, they expect you to set an example. Miss Heber-Knollys feels that very strongly. And Horace, who is a far cleverer man than Doctor Tremlett, says all you have to do is to keep yourself up."

"In other words, Maria," cooed Gerty in the voice of the dove, "you must show Spirit. And that is what I always tell you."

There were times when Gerty was amazing. Her audacity took away the breath even of Ethel. As for Maria she felt a little giddy. She was fascinated.

The She serpent.

XXXVI

MARIA went to the Floral Hall. And she was seen there to great advantage. She wore a new hat chosen for her by Ethel at the most fashionable shop in the city; she distributed the prizes to the Orphans' Guild in a manner which extorted praise from even the diminished Gertrude; she didn't actually "say a few words," but her good heart—speaking figuratively of course—and her motherly presence spoke for her; and as Miss Heber-Knollys said, in felicitously proposing a vote of thanks to the Mayoress on whose behalf the Mayor responded, she had brought a ray of sunshine into the lives of those who saw the sun too seldom.

This achievement was a facer for the designing Gertrude, also for the antiquated Doctor Tremlett. On the other hand, it was a triumph for Ethel and for the modern school of medicine. Horace, Doctor Cockburn, was reinstated. Maria would still have felt safer with some one who really understood the heart and its ways, but, as Ethel pointed out to her, she would earn the admiration of everybody if she could manage to postpone her really serious illness until the following year.

Maria, at any rate, was open to reason. For the sake of the general life of the community she would do her best. But it was very hard upon her; far harder than people realized. As she had once pathetically told Josiah, "she hadn't been brought up to that kind of thing," to which the Mayor promptly rejoined, "that he hadn't either, but he was as good as some who had."

Education was what the Mayor called a Flam. In the main it wasn't prattical. He allowed that it was useful in certain ways and in carefully regulated doses, but of late years it had been ridiculously overdone and was in a fair way to ruin the country. Education didn't agree with everybody. He knew a case in point.

A classical instance of schooling misapplied would always remain in his mind. There were times when he brooded over this particular matter in secret, for he never spoke of it openly. His youngest girl, upon whose upbringing a fabulous sum had been lavished, had cast such a blot on the family escutcheon that it was almost impossible to forgive her. It was all very well for Ethel to talk of Sally's doings in Serbia. That seemed the best place for people like her. Yet, as a matter of strict equity, and Josiah was a just man, although a harsh one, he supposed that presently he would have to do something in the matter.

Under the surface he was a good deal troubled by Sally. She was out of his will and he had fully made

up his mind to have nothing more to do with her; she had had carte blanche in the matter of learning, and the only use she had made of it was to disgrace him in the eyes of the world.

All that, however, was before the war. And there was no doubt that the war had altered things. Before the war he lived for money and worldly reputation; but now that he was in the thick of the fight some of his ideas had changed. Money, for instance, seemed to matter far less than formerly; and he had come to see that the only kind of worldly reputation worth having didn't depend upon externals. His success as a public man had taught him that. It wasn't his fine house on The Rise, or the fact that he had become one of the richest men in the city, that had caused him to be unanimously invited to carry on for another year. Other qualities had commended him. He didn't pretend to be what he was not, and the people of the soundest judgment seemed to like him all the better on that account.

He was beginning to see now that the case of Sally would have to be reconsidered. In spite of the damnable independence which had always been hers from the time she was as high as the dining-room table, there was no doubt that she was now fighting hard for a cause worth fighting for. He had not reached the point of telling Mossop to put her back in his will, but the conviction was growing upon him that he would have to do so.

At the same time it was going to hurt. He could have wished now that he hadn't been quite so hasty in the matter. It was not his way to indulge in vain regrets or to pay much attention to unsolicited advice, but it seemed a pity that he had not listened to Mossop in the first instance. This business of Sally, in a manner of speaking, would be in the nature of a public climb down. And there had been one already.

As far as Melia and her husband were concerned his conscience pricked him more than a little. At first it had gone sorely against the grain to revoke the ban upon his contemptuously defiant eldest daughter and his former barman. But once having done so, it had come suddenly upon him that he had gone wrong in that affair from the outset. The provocation had been great, but he had let his feelings master him. Melia and Hollis were not exonerated. She ought to have shown more respect for his wishes, and a man in the position of Hollis ought to prove himself before he ventures to ask for his employer's daughter; but, if he had to deal with the episode again, he felt, in the light of later experience, that he would have acted differently.

However, by the end of November, Josiah had made up his mind to restore Melia and Sally to his will. It was only a question of when he should do so. But this was a matter in which his usual power of volition seemed to desert him. In other affairs of life to decide on a thing was at once to do it; but now

he hesitated, putting off from day to day. It was a dose of particularly disagreeable medicine that there seemed no immediate need to swallow.

A day soon came, however, when he was rather bitterly to rue his vacillation. One morning Josiah arrived at the City Hall at a quarter to ten. A meeting of the Ways and Means Committee was called for a quarter past and he had to take the chair in the Mayor's parlor. When he entered the room he found the Town Clerk standing in front of a fire of the Best Blackhampton Bright, a twinkle in his eye and a formidable sheaf of documents in his hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Mayor." Perhaps a faintly quizzical greeting, respectful though it was. But this shrewd dog Aylett, with a pair of humorous eyes looking through gold-rimmed glasses which hung by a cord from his neck, had a slightly quizzical manner with everybody. He knew his value to the city of Blackhampton; he was the ablest Town Clerk it had ever had.

"Mornin', Aylett," said his worship in that official voice which seemed to get deeper and deeper at every meeting over which he presided.

"I suppose you've read your *Tribune* this morning?" Aylett had an easy chatty way with everybody from the Mayor down. He was so well used to high affairs that he could be slightly jocular without impairing the dignity of a grandee and without loss of his own.

"As a matter of fact I haven't," said the Mayor. "The girl forgot to deliver it this morning at Strathfieldsaye. Don't know, Aylett, what things are coming to in this city, I don't really. We'll have to have an alteration if we are not going to lose the war altogether."

The Town Clerk smiled at this, and then he took the municipal copy of the *Tribune* from among other works of reference on a side table, folded back the page and handed the paper to the Mayor. "That youngest girl of yours has been going it."

It was an unfortunate piece of phrasing on the part of one so accomplished as Aylett. Josiah started a little and then with an air of rather grim anxiety proceeded to read the *Tribune*.

There was three quarters of a column devoted to the doings of Miss Sarah Ann Munt; a sight which, with certain sinister recollections in his mind, went some way to assure Josiah that his worst fears were realized. But he had but to read a line or so to be convinced that there was no ground for pessimism. Miss Sarah Ann Munt, it seemed, had rendered such signal service to the Allied Cause that she had brought great honor upon herself, upon a name highly and justly esteemed in the city of Blackhampton, and even upon the country of her origin.

The *Tribune* told the thrilling story of her deeds with pardonable gusto. On the outbreak of war she had volunteered for service with the Serbian Army.

Owing to her great skill as a motor driver, for which in pre-war days she had been noted, she had been attached in that capacity to the Headquarters Staff. She had endured the perils and the hardships of the long retreat; and her coolness, her daring and her mother wit had enabled her to bring her car, containing the Serbian Commander and his Chief of Staff, in safety through the enemy lines at a moment when they had actually been cut off. "It is not too much to say," declared the *Tribune* whose language was official, "that the story of Miss Munt's deeds in Serbia is one of the epics of the war. By her own personal initiative she did much to avert a disaster of the first magnitude. No single individual since the war began has rendered a more outstanding service to the Allied Cause. She has already been the recipient of more than one high decoration, and on page five will be found an official photograph of her receiving yet another last week in Paris from the hands of the Chief of the Republic."

Josiah felt a little dizzy as with carefully assumed coolness he turned to page five. There, sure enough, was Sally, looking rather fine drawn in her close-fitting khaki, but with that half-wicked down-looking smile upon her that he knew so well. With her leggings, and her square chin and her "bobbed" hair which hung upon her cheeks in side pieces and gave her a resemblance to Joan of Arc she was like an exceedingly handsome, but as they say in Blackhamp-

ton, a rather "gallus" boy. The hussy! He couldn't help laughing at the picture of her, it was so exactly how he best remembered her. The amused slightly defiant You-Be-Damned air was so extraordinarily like her.

"Blame my cats!" said the Mayor.

For several minutes it was his only remark.

XXXVII

THE meeting of the Ways and Means Committee which had been called for a quarter past ten was of more than local importance. It was of national importance as the Mayor was careful to inform its members, among whom were the picked brains of the community, when he informally opened the business. But it was not until twenty minutes to eleven that he was able to do so. It was not that the Committee itself was unpunctual; it was simply that one and all had seen that morning's *Tribune* and that the common task had perforce to yield for the nonce to their hearty congratulations.

For one thing, the Mayor had become decidedly popular; for another, one more glorious page had been written in history by the Blackhampton born. It was really surprising the number of absolutely eminent people who at one time or another had contrived to be born at Blackhampton. In no city in England did local patriotism run higher, in no city in England was there better warrant for it. The Ways and Means Committee was quite excited. It was almost childishly delighted at having, as their Chairman, the rather embarrassed parent of one who, as Sir Reuben Jope, senior alderman and thrice ex-mayor, said in

a well turned phrase, "bade fair to become the most famous woman in the Empire."

Perhaps a certain piquancy was lent to an event that was already historical, by the knowledge in possession of those in the inner circle of municipal life that the Mayor had been hard hit by a former episode in the dashing career of Miss Sally. That episode belonged to the pre-war period when the stock of Mr. Josiah Munt did not stand nearly so high in the market as it did that morning. More than one of these seated round the council board with their eyes on the Chairman had relished the public chastening of the lord of Strathfieldsaye. He had been smitten in a tender place and they were not so sorry for him as they might have been. But other times other modes of thought. Since July, 1914, water had flowed under Sharrow Bridge. Nothing could have been more eloquent of the fact than the rather excited cordiality of the present gathering.

"I really think, gentlemen," said Sir Reuben Jope, "that the City should recognize Miss Munt's extremely gallant behavior. I presume, Mr. Town Clerk, it is competent to do so."

"Oh, quite, sir—oh, quite." In the expressive words in which the Mayor reconstructed the scene that evening for the benefit of the Mayoress, "that Aylett was grinning all over his lantern-jawed mug like a Barbary ape."

"Then I shall propose at the next meeting of the

Council that a public presentation be made to Miss Munt."

"I shall be glad to second that, Sir Reuben," said Mr. Alderman Limpenny, "when the time comes to do so."

But the Mayor interposed with asperity: "No, no, no, gentlemen. We can't have anything of the kind. Very good of you, I'm sure, but we must get on with the business." His worship rapped smartly upon the municipal mahogany. "This is war time, remember. We've got to discuss that contract of Perkins and Baylis. Seems to me, as I said at the last meeting, that those jockeys are over-charging the city forty per cent. You know, gentlemen, we've got to stop this leakage of public money. Whatever they may do in Whitehall, we are not going to stand for it here. Signing blank checks and dropping them in Corporation Square is not our form. As long as I sit in this chair there is going to be strict control of the public purse. And there is not going to be graft in this city neither. This is not Westminster. We don't propose to allow a public department to make a little mistake in its accounts of a few odd millions sterling and then jog quietly on as if nothing had occurred."

"Hear! hear!" from the City Treasurer.

"This war is costing the British people more than seven millions a day at the present time and to my mind it's wonderful that they are able to do it at the

price. However, gentlemen, that is by the way. Let us return to the contract of Perkins and Baylis."

Truth to tell the contract of Perkins and Baylis had less attraction for the Committee at that particular moment than the picture in the *Tribune*. Somehow, the picture had captured its imagination. Whether it was the leggings, the "bobbed" hair, the Joan of Arc profile, or the "gallus" smile of the undefeated Miss Sally, it was quite certain that the last had not been heard of her historic actions.

The Committee of Ways and Means was not alone in its response to the picture in the *Tribune* and the great deeds it commemorated. It was the talk of the whole city. Josiah moved that day and for many days in a kind of reflected glory. Wherever he went congratulations were showered upon him. Three cheers were given him at the Club when he came in to lunch. There was a decided tendency to identify him personally with Sally's fame, which, if exceedingly gratifying, was in the peculiar circumstances not a little disconcerting.

For one thing, he was rather at a loss to know what line he should take in the matter. On the unhappy occasion of Sally's going to prison he had written her what he called "a very stiff letter." In pretty blunt language he had told her that as she had disgraced him in the sight of the world he should have no more to do with her and that he intended to disinherit her.

To this letter no reply had been received. It was

the kind of letter which did not call for one. Since that time nothing had passed between Sally and himself on that subject or on any other. But for some months now Josiah had rather keenly regretted that his attitude had been so definite. The war seemed to soften the past and to sharpen the present. In some respects he was a changed man; one less overbearing in temper, one less harsh in judgment.

The times had altered. Life itself had altered. He was not a man to cry over spilt milk, or to deplore the bygone, but at this moment he had one sharp regret. Some weeks before Sally had burst into fame he had made up his mind to restore her to his will and meant to write and tell her so. But for a man of his sort the task was hard and he had weakly put it off from day to day. And now, alas, it was too late to do it with the grace of the original intention. It would seem like compulsion now. Josiah was keenly vexed with himself. Nothing could have been more eloquent of the rule which hitherto had controlled his life, "Do not put off until to-morrow, etc." In times like those a cardinal maxim.

XXXVIII

THE Mayor was in a false position in regard to his youngest daughter and he had only himself to blame. But much of his strength lay in the fact that he was the kind of man whom experience teaches. Delays, it seemed, were highly dangerous. He must make up his mind to put his pride in his pocket.

It was not an easy or pleasant operation, but it had to be performed. Nevertheless, the town had been ringing a full ten days with the name of Sally before he could bring himself to turn out after dinner of a December evening and walk along the road as far as The Gables.

He was received in the library, as usual, by Lawyer Mossop. The city's leading solicitor had recently aged considerably. He looked thinner and grayer, his cheeks were hollow, there were more lines in his face. His only son, George, who in the natural course of events would have carried on a very old established business, had been killed in France, and news had lately come that his sister Edith's boy, whom he had helped to educate and who had already begun to make his way at the Bar, had been permanently disabled by the explosion of a hand grenade.

Long training in self-conquest, backed by generations of emotional restraint, enabled Lawyer Mossop still to play the man of the world. He rose with a charming smile and an air of ready courtesy to receive his distinguished client and neighbor. At a first glance there was nothing to tell that for the solicitor, life had lost its savor.

The two men had a long and intimate talk. Oddly unlike as they were in temperament, education, mental outlook, their minds had never marched so well together as this evening in all their years of intercourse. Somehow the rude vigor, the robust sense of the client appeared to stimulate the more civilized, the more finely developed lawyer. Moreover, he could not fail to perceive that it was a humaner, more liberal-minded Josiah Munt than he had ever known who had come to talk with him this evening. Success, popularity, response to the overwhelming public need had ripened a remarkable man, rubbed off some of the corners, softened and harmonized the curious dissonances that had jarred in what, after all, was a fine character. Rough diamond as Josiah Munt still was and must always remain in the eyes of the critical, he stood out this evening as a right-thinking, straight-seeing citizen, a real asset to the community.

"Mossop," he said a little shamefacedly, after their conversation had gone on some time, "I don't like having to own up to it, but I'm bound to say that I wish

I'd had the sense to take that advice you gave me in the matter of Sally."

The lawyer could not help a furtive smile at the humility of the tone.

"You've got to put that gel back in my will." It was a pretty stiff dose now that it had to be swallowed and a fierce frown did not conceal its nature. "And I want you to believe, Mossop,"—there was an odd earnestness in the deep voice—"that I had made up my mind to do it long before this—this damnable Serbian business happened."

The lawyer assured Mr. Munt that he was convinced of that.

"Serves me right, though, for delaying. Mossop, I'm annoyed with myself. It has the look of a forceput now, but I as I say——"

The lawyer nodded a nice appreciation of the circumstances.

"And while I'm about it, I've made up my mind to put Melia, my eldest girl, back as well."

The lawyer gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

"My three gels are now going to share alike. But you must provide six thousand pounds for Gertrude Preston."

The lawyer penciled a brief note on his blotting pad.

"As you know, Mossop, I've made a goodish bit, one way and another, since this war began. Those girls ought to be very well off. And you know, of

course, that we are takin' in the next house for my hospital along The Rise. It'll give us another twenty beds—making forty in all."

The lawyer said in his level voice that he understood that to be the Mayor's intention when he had negotiated the purchase with Mr. Harvey Mortimore.

"We bought that property very well, eh? Not going to get less in value."

The lawyer agreed.

"I'm now considering the question of making it over permanently to the Corporation. Wouldn't make a bad nest egg for the city, eh?"

"A very generous gift, Mr. Munt."

"Anyhow, I'm arranging with the Duke to come over on the twenty-sixth of January to open the new annex. And in the meantime we'll think about giving it to the city as an orphanage or a cottage hospital."

XXXIX

THE next morning Josiah paid a visit to Love Lane. The business of Sally had taught him a lesson. Events moved so quickly in these crowded days that it might not be wise to postpone a reconciliation with Melia.

So busy had the Mayor been since his return from Bridlington at the end of August that he had not found time to visit his eldest daughter, nor had she been to Strathfieldsaye since her first somewhat uncomfortable appearance there. She was still inclined to be much on her dignity. Women who lead lonely lives in oppressive surroundings are not easily able to forget the past. The olive branch had been offered already; but it was by no means certain that Melia intended to accept her father's overtures.

This December morning, however, as the great man, proceeding majestically on foot from the Duke of Wellington, turned up the narrow street with its worn cobblestones and its double row of mean little houses, he fully intended as far as might be humanly possible "to right things with Melia once for all."

The Mayor entered the shop and found his eldest daughter serving a woman in a white apron and a black and white checked shawl over her head with two

pennyworth of carrots and a stick of celery. The honest dame was so taken aback by the arrival of the Mayor of the city, who was personally known to every man, woman and child throughout the district as one of a great triumvirate, of whom the King and the Prime Minister were the other two, that she fled in hot haste without paying for the spoils she bore away in her apron.

Melia, however, true to the stock whence she sprang, had no false delicacy in the matter. Without taking the slightest notice of the august visitor, she was the other side the counter in a jiffy, out of the shop and calling after the fleeing customer, "You haven't paid your fivepence, Mrs. Odell."

The Mayor stood at the shop door, watching with a kind of grim enjoyment the process of the fivepence being extracted. He plainly approved it. Melia, with all her limitations, had the root of the matter in her. Upon her return, a little flushed and rather breathless, he refrained from paying her the compliment he felt she deserved but was content to ask if trade was brisk.

Trade was brisker, said Melia, than she had ever known it.

Josiah was glad of that. He then looked round to assure himself that they were alone in the shop and being convinced that such was the case, he stood a moment awkwardly silent, balancing himself like a stork first on one leg and then on the other.

"Gel," he took her hand suddenly, "you are back in my will. Sally's back too. You are both going to have an equal share with Ethel." He felt the roughened, toil-stained hand begin to quiver a little in his strong grasp. "Bygones have got to be bygones. Understand me." He drew her towards him and kissed her stoutly and firmly in the middle of the forehead.

He retained his hold while her hot tears dripped on to his hand. She stood tense and rigid, unable to speak or move. But she knew as she stood there that it was no use fighting him or fighting herself. His masterfulness, his simplicity, his courage had reawakened her earliest and deepest instinct, the love and admiration she had once had for him. Of a sudden she began to sob pitifully. With a queer look on his face he took out a large red handkerchief and put his arms round her and wiped her eyes slowly and with a gentleness hard to credit in him, just as he had done when as a very little girl she had fallen and hurt herself on the tiled yard of the Duke of Wellington.

Speech was not possible to father or daughter for several minutes as time is reckoned in Love Lane, although to both it seemed infinitely longer, and then said the Mayor, "We'll expect you up at Strathfieldsaye on Christmas Day. Lunch one-thirty sharp." Then he added in a tone that was almost peremptory, "If that man o' yours happens to get home on leave your mother would like him to come, too."

Her tear-dimmed eyes looked at him rather queerly.

"Didn't you know, Dad?" The voice had something in it of the child he remembered but it was so faint that it was barely audible.

"Know what?" His own voice had more asperity than it was meant to have. But she was able to make allowances for it, as she always had done in the days when she really understood him.

"Bill's in hospital."

He drew in his breath quickly. The thought ran through his mind that it was well he had had the sense to learn by experience. "Where? What hospital?" He was just a trifle nervous, just a shade flurried. As near as a toucher he had put it off too long, as in the case of Sally.

"In France. At the Base."

"Wound?"

"Yes."

"Bad one?"

"He says it's only a cushy . . . but . . . but somehow I don't trust him."

"How do you mean you don't trust him?"

"I mean this, Dad." She was quite composed now; the tears and the shakings were under control; she spoke slowly and calmly. "No matter how bad he was, he's not one as would ever let on."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"He'd be afraid it might upset you. He's got like that lately." Suddenly the hard eyes filled again. "He grins and bears things now."

Josiah nodded rather grimly, but made no comment. He turned on his heel. "See you this day fortnight up at the house." Abruptly, in deep thought, he went away.

XL

BILL'S wound, as it turned out, was a painful one, and it had an element of danger. His right leg was shattered, also poisoned badly; it would take a long time to heal and there was a fear that amputation might be necessary. Such a case demanded special treatment, and to Melia's joy at the beginning of Christmas week she received word from her father that her husband had been transferred from France to the Mayor of Blackhampton's hospital.

There is no saying how this providential arrangement came about. It may have been coincidence; on the other hand it may not. Josiah in his second year of office was certainly becoming a power, if not an actual puller of strings. Influence may or may not have been at work; anyhow the Corporal bore the long journey so well that Melia, as a special concession, was allowed to see him for a short time on Christmas Eve.

She found him wonderfully cheerful in spite of the fact that he had endured much pain; more cheerful perhaps than she had ever known him. A subtle change had taken place since she had seen him last. The look of utter weariness had yielded to something else. It was as if he had been spiritualized by suffering; indeed as he smiled at her gently from his

bed she felt that he was not the kind of man she used to know.

The memory of those few exquisite days in the summer was still in their minds. It was from that point they now took up their lives. For both the world had changed. They saw each other with new eyes. This man of hers had been as good as his word, he had done his best to come back to her; and there, full of pain, he lay helpless as a baby, yet now inexpressibly dear as the only thing in life that had any meaning for her. As for himself, as he smiled up at her, the grace of his dreams was again upon her. This was she about whom the romance of his youth had been woven. He didn't see her as she was, a commonplace, worn, gray-haired woman, or if he did he remembered the sacrifices she had made for his sake; he remembered that she had once believed in him, and after long days she had come to believe in him again.

There was rare conflict in the clean and quiet room. The walls were hung with holly; everything about the place seemed to minister to a wonderful sense of home. He sighed a deep content as she took a chair by his bed and held a feverish hand in hers.

"Your father's hospital!" A deep sigh spoke of gratitude. "When you happen to see him tell him from me I'm glad to be in it."

She promised to do so.

"It's a good place." His eyes and his voice grew softer than their wont in speaking of his father-in-

law. "A bit of luck to be here." He sighed luxuriously.

Said Melia, "You must take your time getting well, Bill."

Eyes of suffering looked into hers. "I expect I won't be right just yet." They were still together, passing the time with delightful fragments of talk and with fragments of silence equally delightful when a nurse came importantly into the room to say that the Mayor had arrived unexpectedly to look round the hospital and to wish a happy Christmas to his guests.

Melia rose rather nervously. "I think I'll be going, Bill."

"Not yet, my dear." The voice from the bed was calm and quiet. "We must let bygones be bygones. The times has changed."

She was glad to hear him say that. And she had not told him yet of her father's recent act of reparation. Should she tell him now? Was the moment favorable? Or had she better wait until——

The question, however, was already decided. Too late to tell him now. The door at the other end of the room was open and the Commandant had entered followed by his worship the Mayor.

"Only one bed in this room, sir," said the Commandant. "A special case. Corporal Hollis."

The Mayor looked calmly round. He didn't see Melia who was hidden by a screen between the bed-

stead and the door. "I notice, ma'am, you've got another door yonder." He pointed to the other end of the room. "Hope these new casements fit well."

The new casements fitted very well indeed.

"All the same,"—the deep voice was very much that of the man of affairs—"I expect you get a bit of draught here when the wind blows from the north-east."

The draught was nothing to speak of, he was assured.

"Any complaints? Heating apparatus all right? Ventilators working properly?"

There were no complaints to make of any kind.

"Thank you, ma'am," said the Mayor. "You can leave me here alone a few minutes with Corporal Hollis—if he's well enough to talk to me."

The Commandant retired, closing the door after her, and the Mayor slowly approached the bed.

"How are you, Bill?" It was a tone of simple, hearty kindness.

Before the occupant of the bed could answer the question, Josiah, coming round the corner of the screen, was taken aback by the sight of his eldest daughter. He was not prepared for her, yet he was quite equal to the situation. "Hulloa, Melia"—it was a father's cordiality. "How are you, gel? Happy Christmas to you. Happy Christmas to you both."

For a little while he stood talking to them, easily and without constraint, while the Corporal lay in his

bed saying nothing, but with his worn face softened by pain and service and the thought of others. From time to time he smiled grayly at the Mayor's pungent humor. Even in the old days "the Mester" had always had a liberal share of that quality in which his fellow townsmen excelled. Josiah's sense of humor was very keen, particularly when it came to assessing the shortcomings of other people; it had a breadth, a gusto, a penetration which high office seemed to amplify. His stories, comments, criticisms of those prominently before the world kept the Corporal quietly amused for some time. Finally, the Mayor looked at his watch. "I must be getting on," he said. "I've got to address the War Workers' Association at six o'clock. And at seven I've promised to look in at the Hearts of Oak annual soiree and concert."

Very simply and with the manliness that was part of him he held out his hand. Without hesitation the Corporal took it. They looked in the eyes of one another. "I hope you're quite comfortable," said Josiah. "If there's anything you need you have only to let me know. So long, my boy, and don't be in a hurry to get well. See you to-morrow, Melia. Wish you could have brought Bill along with you. Happy Christmas."

With a wave of the hand for them both the Mayor went away, exuding an atmosphere of kindness and goodwill towards all men except Germans. In the Mayor's opinion Germans were not men at all.

XLI

IT would have been ungracious of Melia not to spend Christmas Day at Strathfieldsaye. Indeed, she felt that she could hardly do otherwise. That stubborn thing, pride, might still be lurking in the corners of her heart, yet it durst not show itself openly; besides, whatever its secret machinations, she could not overlook the fact that her father was striving to wipe out the past. Perhaps the past is the only thing easier to create than to destroy, but certainly Josiah was now trying his best to undo it. And this Melia knew.

In view of the important function on Christmas Day, Melia had been taken in hand by Aunt Gerty. It would have been natural to resent the interference of that lady, but it was clear that her actions were inspired "from above." At the same time no emissary could have been more tactful, more discreet. In situations that called for finesse she was hard to beat; and she was able to have Melia "fitted" for a *really* good coat and skirt by her own accomplished dressmaker, Miss Pratt, and helped her also to choose a hat at Messrs. Rostron and Merton's, the best shop in the city, without arousing antagonism in that sensitive

soul. Also she whispered in Melia's ear that there was reason to believe that her father had a little surprise in store for her on Christmas Day.

In regard to "the surprise" Gerty's information was correct. And as Melia, looking and feeling far more fashionable than she had ever done in her life, turned up at Strathfieldsaye at a quarter past one, "the surprise" duly materialized even before the Christmas luncheon at one-thirty. Her father gave her a check for fifty pounds.

On Melia's last visit to Strathfieldsaye she had felt quite "out of it," but not so now. Partly it may have been the new clothes. Formerly, she had felt self-conscious, awkward, hopelessly shabby in the midst of a grandeur to which she was unused, whereby she was thrown back upon her embittered self, but now her changing circumstances, the considered kindness of her mother and Gerty, and especially her father's new attitude towards her gave her a sense of happiness almost.

Perhaps the fact that Ethel, Mrs. Doctor Cockburn, was unable to be present may also have ministered a little to this feeling. Ethel's absence was much deplored. Somehow a void was created which seemed to rob the modest function of any claim to distinction it might have had; yet in her heart Melia felt that the absence of Mrs. Doctor made it easier for her personally, and even for her mother, whatever it may have done for people so accomplished in the world as

her father now was, and for Aunt Gerty who somehow had learned to be genteel without being stuck up. With Ethel, on the other hand, she had never felt quite at her ease. Nor did anybody, if it came to that. Putting people at their ease was not among Mrs. Doctor Cockburn's many gifts. She was so much a lady that simple folk were apt to be overwhelmed by her sense of her happy condition. It was difficult for ordinary people to be their plain selves in her presence; ordinary they might be, but in social intercourse Mrs. Doctor seemed almost to resent their plainness as being in the nature of a slight upon herself.

However, Ethel was not there. And in Melia's opinion her absence gave a finer flavor to the turkey, a gentler quality to the plum pudding and a more subtle aroma to the blazing fumes that crowned it. Nevertheless, it was a theme for much comment. An Event of the first magnitude was almost due to take place in the family; and the head of it, presiding over the modest feast with a kind of genial majesty which ever-growing public recognition of his unusual qualities seemed to enhance and to humanize, made no secret of the fact that he very much wanted to have a little grandson.

"Well, Josiah," said the gallant Gerty, adding a little water to some excellent claret and smiling at him with two level rows of white teeth, "I am sure we all hope your wish will be gratified. No man, I'm

sure, if I may be allowed to say so, more thoroughly deserves a little grandson than yourself."

To some minds, perhaps, it was not quite in the Gertrude tradition. It was Christmas Day and in crowning the Christmas pudding Josiah had been a thought on the free side, no doubt, with some of the finest old brandy even the Duke of Wellington could boast; but in any case she meant well. All the same, the Mayoress could not repress a slight frown of annoyance. The demonstration did not amount to more than that. It did not really convict Gerty of bad taste, but Maria felt somehow that she had to watch her continually. Gerty was such a Schemer. Besides, what business was it of Gerty's anyway?

"Thank you, Gert." The Mayor raised his glass to the Serpent with the homely charm that was never seen to greater advantage than on Christmas Day in the family circle. "Good health and good luck all round. I must have that little grandson, somehow. Melia, my gel, that's something for you and your good man to bear in mind."

Melia flushed. She looked so confused and so unhappy that the watchful Gerty, who with all her ways really spent a good deal of time thinking for others, suddenly perceived that it might be kind to change the subject.

"Josiah," said Gerty, "what is this one hears about a public presentation to Sally?"

"You may well ask that." The Mayor held up a

glass of '68 port to the light. "Some of those jockeys on the City Council have been making themselves very officious."

"Glad to hear it, Josiah." Gerty was just as pat as your hat. "Think of the honor she's brought to the city. Surely right and surely proper that what Sally has done should be publicly recognized. Even the *Times* says she's a credit to the Empire."

"All very well," said his worship. "But it's nothing like ten years since I used to lay her across my knee and spank her. There was one slipper I kept for the purpose." With a humorous sigh he converged upon the brim of his wine glass. "But I could never make nothing of that gel. There was always the devil in her. Public presentation's all very well, but some of those jockeys on the Council have persuaded the Duke to make it, and he's fair set on my takin' the chair as I'm Mayor o' the city and so on."

"The Duke is such a sensible man!" An arch preen of Gerty's plumage. "Only right and proper, Josiah, that you should take the chair. The other day, according to the *Tribune,* the French Government gave her a very high decoration. She's quite a heroine in Paris."

"I'm not surprised at anything." In the Mayor's grim eye was quite as much vexation as there was humor. "Stubborn as a mule. And that independent. Must always go her own gait. Nice thing my having to preside over three thousand people while

she's being handed an illuminated address. Of course, that Aylett's at the back of it. Mischievous dog! I said if there must be a public presentation, as I was the father o' the hussy, it was up to somebody else to preside. But, seemingly, they don't take to the idea."

"Of course not, Josiah."

Groaned the Mayor, "I'll have to make the best of it, I suppose. Still, a scurvy trick on the part of that Aylett."

XLII

IN spite of the Mayor's attitude, which was unsympathetic to the verge of discouragement, the Town Clerk was able to inform him on New Year's morning that Miss Sarah Ann Munt had graciously consented to accept an illuminated address in commemoration of her deeds on January twenty-fifth at the Floral Hall. The news was not received graciously. Josiah had comforted himself with the not unreasonable hope that the Hussy would decline the presentation; it would be so like her to upset their plans. But no, after all, Sally preferred to behave with still deeper cussedness. She wrote a charmingly polite letter from the Depôt of the Northern Command at Screwton, where she was at present attached, to inform the members of the Blackhampton City Council that it would give her great pleasure to attend the function on January twenty-fifth and that she was very sensible of the honor about to be conferred upon her. And that, after all, was even more like her than a refusal of the proposal would have been.

Josiah was more disconcerted than he cared to own. It was necessary to hide his feelings as far as he could, but he was not a finished dissembler, and, in addition to "that Aylett," there were several members of the

Council who seemed to enjoy the situation. Several of these received a piece of the Mayor's mind in the course of the morning. "He didn't know what they could be thinking of to be wastin' the Town's money in that way." In other words, Josiah had decided to carry things off with a high hand.

That evening, after dinner, he sat down and wrote a letter.

"Dear Sarah Ann, I understand that you are to be presented with an Address on the twenty-fifth at the Floral Hall. Your mother and I hope that you will be able to come and stay here over the week end. Your affectionate Father, Josiah Munt. P.S. No need to tell you that this Affair is none of my doing."

It was not an easy letter to write nor was the Mayor altogether satisfied when it was written. But in the circumstances it wouldn't do to say too much.

By return of post came a dry, rather curt note from Sally. She thanked her father for the invitation, but she had already promised Ethel that when next in Blackhampton she would stay at Park Crescent.

Josiah felt annoyed. Once more it was so like her. Somehow the reply left him less easy in his mind than ever. He would be glad when the ordeal of the twenty-fifth was over. He didn't trust the minx. As likely as not she would play some trick or other; she was quite capable of affronting him publicly. However, the eyes of the world were upon him, he must keep a stiff upper lip, he must see that she didn't down him.

In the meantime, from another quarter, bitter disappointment came. The high hopes of a little grandson did not materialize. Instead of a lusty Horace Josiah Cockburn bursting upon a flattered world, the inferior tribe of Gwenneths and Gwladyses had a Gwendolen added to their number. It was quite a blow. The Mayor and all his family had set their hearts on a boy. For once the successful Ethel had been less than herself. She had failed conspicuously. It was impossible to conceal the fact that people were a little disappointed with her.

Happily, Gwendolen had enough sense of proportion and right feeling to arrive according to schedule. It would have been unpardonable in her to have prevented Mrs. Doctor from attending the important function on the twenty-fifth at the Floral Hall and the even more important ceremony on the twenty-sixth when the Duke was to open the new annex to the Mayor of Blackhampton's hospital, which at one acute moment she had threatened to do. Fortunately Gwendolen remembered herself in time. She contrived to make her appearance on January second in this vale of tears, and, although from the outset not a popular member of society, after all she was less unpopular than she might have been had she deferred her arrival until a week later.

XLIII

THE scene at the Floral Hall was worthy of the occasion. All that was best in the public life of Blackhampton and of the county of Middleshire was gathered in force in the ornate building in New Square.

There was more than one reason for the representative character of the audience. In the first place it was felt to be a royal opportunity to exalt the horn of patriotism. This public recognition of the heroic Miss Munt was a compliment paid to the women of Britain, to those many thousands of magnificent women whose deeds had proved them worthy of their brothers, their husbands and their sons. Again, the figure of Sally herself had fired the public imagination. A Joan of Arc profile overlaid by a general air of you-be-damnedness made an ideal picture postcard as her father had already found to his cost. All sorts of people seemed to take a fantastic pleasure in addressing them to Josiah Munt, Esquire, J.P., Strathfieldsaye, The Rise, Blackhampton. "How proud you must be of her," et cetera. Ad nauseam.

Moreover, this function was intended as a tribute to the Mayor himself. His worth was now recognized by all classes. He was the right man in the

right place; his boundless energy and his practical sense were of the utmost value to the community; and the wise men of that thickly populated district seized the chance of paying homage to Josiah and at the same time of exploiting a powerful personality in the interests of the state.

At three o'clock, when the Mayor came on to the platform, the large hall was very full. He was followed by the Duke of Dumbarton, a genial, young-middle-aged nobleman, who was to make the presentation, and by other magnates. Behind the Chairman many notables were seated already; and to lend point to the somewhat intimate nature of the proceedings, which may or may not have been part of the design of these "in the know," the members of Josiah's family with the national heroine in their midst had been grouped prominently upon his right hand.

The Town Clerk, a little wickedly perhaps, had intimated beforehand to the Mayor that the proceedings would really be in the nature of "a family party." At all events, his worship took the hint "of that Aylett" literally. Before sitting down at the table and taking formal charge of the meeting his eyes chanced to light on a group of men in hospital blue for whom places had been reserved in the front row of the balcony. Among these he recognized Corporal Hollis, whose leg as a result of five weeks' special treatment had improved quite remarkably.

The Mayor went to the end of the platform and

called loudly, "Bill, you are wanted down here. Come on to the platform, my boy."

The Corporal did not covet notoriety, but it would have been as wise to thwart the waters of Niagara as to resist the will of the City's chief magistrate at a public meeting. Until his instructions had been carried out there was not a chance of a start being made. Reluctantly realizing this the Corporal in the course of three minutes had made his way down from the gallery and on to the platform, a crutch in each hand, where his august father-in-law received him.

"Come on, Bill." He was shepherded along the front row of chairs as if the presence of three thousand people was a very ordinary matter. "You come and sit with the wife. Colonel Hickman, kindly move up a bit. Thank you. Like a chair for your leg? If you do, I'll get one."

The Corporal declined a chair for his leg, just as the meeting incited by certain officious members of the Town Council broke into cheers. Melia and the Corporal, seated side by side, were covered in momentary confusion. Then the chairman took his seat at the table, reduced the meeting to silence by rapping the board sternly with his mallet and stood up again briefly to open the proceedings. These consisted in patriotic speeches from Lieutenant-General Sir William Hardcastle, K.C.B., and the Duke of Dumbarton, and the presentation of an illuminated scroll in a gold casket to Miss Sarah Ann Munt.

First, a speech excellent in its kind, which paid tribute to the deeds of the sons and daughters of the Empire in all parts of the world; also it emphasized the sternness of the hour and the need for "keeping on, keeping on." Then, amid a flutter of excitement, came the presentation to Miss Munt. It was made by the Duke, a figure deservedly popular all over the district from which, to be sure, he derived immense revenues. A master of courtly phrase and well turned compliment, he gave the heroine of the occasion the full benefit of his powers. And when at last, in the purview of three thousand people, the dauntless Sally came forth to the table to receive the casket and scroll she was a sight to behold.

Rather tall, very slender, brown of cheek and with the eye of a falcon, in her simple, faded, but much beribboned khaki she looked at that moment a child of the gods. At the sight of her a thrill ran through the hall. Cinema, newspaper, picture postcard had led that assembly to set its hopes high, but the reality, in its calm strength, with a faintly ironical smile fusing a noble fixity of purpose, more than fulfilled them. In the youngest daughter of the Mayor of the city was symbolized the glorious spirit of the youth of the Empire.

A hush came over the great audience. The Duke opened the casket and took out the scroll. Everybody seemed fascinated by her, including the members of her own family in a group at the right hand of the

Chair. But there was just one person there who did not seem willing to submit without a struggle to her dynamic influence; and that person was her rather rueful, slightly scandalized male parent.

Even now, in this, of all moments, his worship seemed to detect in that amazing personality the spirit of Damnable Independence. How many times in the past, in the stress of combat, when it had been his will against hers, had he seen that dogged, oh-go-to-the-devil look which would surely have driven him mad had not he been weak enough to admire it secretly. There was no getting topside of a look of that kind. As she stood in the presence of the ducal necktie, with a faint trace of humorous scorn at the corners of her lips, the outraged Chairman suddenly caught and fixed her eye. And as he did so his own eye, as of old, seemed to say to her, "One word from You, our Sally, and I'll give You such a Lammoxing!"

The casket and scroll were handed to Miss Munt, who acknowledged them with a graceful inclination of an imperial head, and then cheers broke out in a hurricane. In part, no doubt, they were inspired by family associations, for her father had grown vastly popular; but in large measure they were due beyond a doubt to sheer power of personality. The secret force which distinguishes one human being from another, over and beyond their works and their walk in life, belonged to Sally in sovereign degree. Her portraits and her fame had kindled hopes which the

dauntless reality had more than fulfilled. In the sight of all she stood a true daughter of her race, four-square, unconquerable.

At last the cheers subsided and then arose demands for a speech from the Mayor. As the result of assiduous practice in war oratory Josiah had won remarkable success. He did not pretend to polish or to flights of intellect or fancy, but he had a knack of speechmaking that was immensely to the taste of his fellow citizens. In response to the insistent demand of the meeting he rose ponderously.

On the crowded platform, as in the body of the hall itself, was many a shrewd judge of men. The average Briton of all classes has an instinct in such matters that is almost uncanny. He knows a man when he sees one. And when the Mayor stood up to address them, a little yet not too much, embarrassed by the nature of his reception, all present knew that they saw one now. Charmed and delighted by the heroine of the piece, so shrewd a body of persons may also have been rather amazed that she had come to happen. But, somehow, her father seemed to explain her. A rough diamond, no doubt, but at that moment, in his self-possession, in his self-belief, in his titanic grappling power when faced with difficulty, he was an expression of the genius of the race.

All the same it was not easy for the Mayor of Blackhampton to find words at that moment. As a rule, when on his legs he did not suffer a lack of them.

He had a natural gift of speech and a faculty of humor which found expression in many a racy idiom. But his powers threatened to desert him now.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. There was a pause and then he began again. "Ladies and gentlemen." There was a second pause while three thousand sympathetic fellow citizens hung upon the phrase. And then at last slowly and grimly the great voice boomed out, "Ladies and gentlemen, there are those who think they can down the Anglo-Saxon race, but"—slight pause—"they don't know what they are un-der-ta-kin'——"

There was one pause more. It lasted but an instant for the meeting broke out in a roar. Only too well had the Mayor interpreted the thought that was dominating the minds of his fellow citizens.

XLIV

ON the Sunday after the famous meeting at the Floral Hall, Bill paid a first visit to Strathfieldsaye. He was loth to yield to the will of his father-in-law, but Josiah would take no denial. Corporal Hollis was a stubborn man, but no one under the rank of a field marshal could hope to resist effectively the Mayor of Blackhampton in his second year of office.

Due notice was given by Josiah that he was going personally to fetch Melia on Sunday afternoon. He intended to drive in his car to Love Lane for that purpose. On the way back he would call at the hospital for the Corporal "who must come along up home and drink a dish of tea with Maria."

The program was not exactly to the taste of Bill, who had little use for tea and perhaps even less use for his "in-laws." But what could he do in face of the Mayor's ukase?

Thus it was that in the twilight of a memorable Sunday the Corporal made his first appearance in Strathfieldsaye's spacious drawing-room. In the past month his leg had surprisingly improved, but final recovery would be long and slow, and he still required two crutches. On entering the room he was a little

disconcerted to find so distinguished a company, for in addition to the Mayoress, mutely superb at the tea table, was Mrs. Doctor Cockburn, more vocal in black velvet, Miss Preston, as usual, touched with fashion, and, standing on the hearthrug, near the fire, in her faded khaki was the slight but martial form of Sally.

The presence of Sally was a surprise to the Mayor. He had not expected to see her there, and as soon as his eye lit on her he gave a start. First of all, however, he shepherded the Corporal into a comfortable chair with a tenderness hard to credit in him, fixing up the injured leg on a second chair and laying the crutches on the carpet by the Corporal's side.

Having done all this, the Mayor moved up to the hearthrug, his hand outstretched. "Very glad to see you here, my gel." Without hesitation and in the frankest way he kissed Sally loudly upon the cheek. It was manly and it was also bold, for such an act seemed perilously like kissing in public a decidedly soldierlike young man.

Sally didn't seem to mind, however. She was just as frank and unaffected as her father. Moreover, she had acquired a rich laugh and an authority of manner almost the equal of his own. She complimented him upon his speech and quizzically added that he ought to stand for Parliament. Josiah promptly rejoined that if he did he'd be as much use as some of those jackasses, no doubt.

The Mayor then carried a cup of tea to the Corporal

and Aunt Gerty provided him with bread and butter and a plate to put it on; and then Sally moved across from the chimneypiece, sat down very simply on a hassock by his side and began at once to talk to him. Plain, direct talk it was, full of technical turns and queer out-of-the-way information which could have only come from the most intimate first-hand knowledge. But it was palpably unstudied, without the least wish to pose or impress, and presently with almost the same air of blunt modesty the Corporal began talking to her.

To Mrs. Doctor and even to Miss Preston it seemed rather odd that a real live graduate of Heaven-knew-where should sit tête-à-tête with poor Melia's husband and be completely absorbed by him and the crude halting syllables he emitted from time to time. Still to the Mayor himself, standing with his broad back to the fire and toying like a large but domesticated wolf with a buttered scone, it didn't seem so remarkable.

Josiah, at any rate, was able to perceive that his youngest daughter and his son-in-law were occupied with realities. They had been through the fire. Battle, murder, death in every unspeakable form had been their companions months on end. These two were full-fledged Initiates in an exclusive Order.

The Mayor, foursquare on the hearthrug, had never seemed more at home in the family circle, but, even his noble self-assurance abated a feather or two out of deference to Sally and the Corporal. They

had been there. They knew. If Josiah had respect for anything it was for actual first-hand experience.

Mrs. Doctor, however, was not fettered by the vanities of hero worship. In spite of Sally and in spite of the Corporal she was able as usual to bring her light tea-table artillery into play. At strategic intervals her high-pitched, authoritative voice took spasmodic charge of the proceedings. Now it was the Egg Fund and the incompetence of Lady Jope, now the latest dicta of Miss Heber-Knollys, now the widespread complaints of the Duke's inaudibility at the Floral Hall.

Miss Preston fully agreed. "So different from you, Josiah." She was well on the target as usual. "But he made up for it, didn't he, by the nice things he said of you when he opened the Annex?"

"Very flattering, wasn't he?" Mrs. Doctor took up the ball. "And wasn't it charming of him to come here to lunch. Such an unaffected man!"

Josiah broke his scone in half and held a piece in each hand. "Why shouldn't he come here?" The voice had the old huffiness, yet mitigated now by an undeniable twinkle of humor. "He got quite as good food here as he'd get at home, even if we don't run to gold plate and flunkeys."

"Quite, Josiah, quite," piped the undefeated Gerty. "And only too glad, I'm sure, to come and see the Mayor of Blackhampton."

The laugh of his worship verged upon the whim-

sical. "Gert, if you want my private opinion, he didn't come to see me at all."

"Pray, then, Father, who did he come to see?" fluted Mrs. Doctor.

Josiah jerked a humorous thumb in the direction of Sally, who was still tête-à-tête with the Corporal.

"Nonsense, Father."

"Well, it's my opinion."

It was hard for Mrs. Doctor to believe that her youngest sister could be the attraction. But her father was clear upon the point. And that being the case it made the pity all the greater that Sally had declined the invitation to be present. She had been urged to come to luncheon and meet the Duke who was anxious to meet her, but she had preferred to stay at Park Crescent and play with the children.

So like her!

XLV

D'YOU mind if I smoke, Mother?"

The lady at the tea-table looked mutely at her lord.

Josiah nodded graciously. "Do as you like, gel."

Sally produced a wisp of paper and a very masculine tobacco pouch and began rolling a cigarette in an extremely competent manner. Josiah proffered a box of Egyptian but Sally preferred her own and struck a match on the sole of her shoe in a fashion at once so accomplished and so boylike as to take away the breath of her mother and Aunt Gerty.

As she sat talking easily and yet gravely to the Corporal with her long straight legs and trim ankles freely displayed by a surprisingly short khaki skirt she looked more like a boy than ever. And such was the thought in the minds of the other three ladies, who agreed tacitly that the skirt and the cigarette and the astonishing freedom of pose were not quite maidenly. Still with those ribbons, and that clear deep voice and that wonderful eye she was fascinating. Even her father, who on principle declined to admire her Damnable Independence, was unable to resist the impact of a personality that was now world famous.

Gazing at her in stern astonishment he pointed to her abbreviated lower garment. "Excuse me, gel," he said, "but do you mind telling us what you've got underneath?"

Sally deigned no reply in words, but stuck the cigarette in the corner of her mouth with unconscious grace and dexterously lifted her skirt. A decidedly workmanlike pair of knickerbockers was disclosed.

Josiah gasped.

The unconcerned Sally continued to talk with the Corporal, while the Mayor, half scandalized, struggled against a guffaw. "Things seem to be changing a bit, as you might say. Don't you think so, Mother?"

Aunt Gerty took upon herself to answer, as she often did, for poor bewildered Maria. "I fully agree, Josiah." She lowered her discreet voice. "But almost a pity . . . almost a pity . . . don't you think?"

The Mayor pursed his lips. "Durned if I know what to think, Gert." He scratched a dubious head. "Seems to me the Empire is not going to be short o' man power for some little time to come, eh?"

"Still . . . not . . . quite . . . maidenly . . . Josiah."

"Daresay you're right." The Mayor fought down his feelings. "Next chicken on the roost'll be the hussy puttin' up for parliament."

"Bound to get in if she does," Gerty sounded rather rueful. "There isn't a constituency in England that

wouldn't jump at the chance of electing her just now."

Josiah breathed hard while this obvious truth sank into his bones, but Mrs. Doctor assured Gerty that she was talking nonsense. Her father being frankly opposed to this pious opinion, Ethel appealed to her mother. Maria, alas, was in the position of a modest wether who has given birth to a superb young panther. She simply didn't know what to think, and by forlornly folding her hands on her lap gave mute expression to her feelings.

At the best, however, it was a futile discussion as Gerty was quick to realize. She turned the talk adroitly into other channels. "This morning," she said, "as I was walking along Queen's Road I had quite a shock. I met a blind man being led by an old woman. And who do you think it was?"

Mrs. Doctor had no idea who it could be.

"It was Harold Nixey the architect. Such a pitiful object! Did you know, Josiah, that he is now quite blind?"

Josiah was aware of the fact.

"How sad, how very sad!" said Ethel. "And he has done so well, so wonderfully well, in France."

Gerty considered it nothing less than a calamity—for an architect of all people. And for one who promised such great things.

Sally was apparently absorbed in talk with the Corporal, but she lifted her eyes quickly. "Blind, did you say? Harold Nixey?"

"Yes," said Gerty. "Such a grievous thing."

"Aye, it is that!" The voice of Josiah was heavy and somber.

Ethel hoped for his recovery.

Her father shook his head. "From what they tell me the sight is completely destroyed. I was with the lad yesterday." It was clear from Josiah's manner that he was moved by real feeling. "Wonderful pluck and cheerfulness. He knows he'll never draw another elevation, but he pretends to that old mother of his that he's going to get better—just to keep her going."

"And you say, Father"—it was the slow precise voice of Sally—"that he can't get better?"

"Not a dog's chance from what Minyard the eye doctor tells me. .It's a gas those devils have been using." The Mayor sighed. "He's a good lad, is that. And he'd have gone far. Rose from nothing, as you might say, but in a year or two he'd have been at the top of the tree." Josiah, whose gospel was "getting on," again sighed heavily.

"I think I'll go and see him, Father, if you'll give me his address." Again the slow, precise voice of Sally.

"Do. It'll be a kindness. Number Fourteen, Torrington Avenue. The second turn on the right past the Brewery along Corfield Road. Pleased to have a visit from you, I'm sure. He talked about you a lot. His mother had read him the *Tribune's* account

of Thursday. He says he used to know you in London when he was studying at South Kensington."

Under Sally's deep tan the blood imperceptibly mounted. "Yes, I used to know him quite well." She didn't add that she had refused rather peremptorily to marry him.

"Well, go and see him, gel. A very good soldier they tell me—D.S.O. and M.C. with two bars."

"*Two* bars, Josiah!" Gerty put up her glasses impressively.

"And earned 'em—they tell me. Come to think of it, it's wonderful what some of these young chaps have done."

"And some of the older ones, too, Josiah." Gerty looked across at the Corporal who was toying pensively with a cigarette that had been pressed upon him.

"Aye, and some of the old uns, too!" The Mayor followed the glance of his sister-in-law with the eye of perfect candor. "And not been brought up to it, mark you. They tell me our B.B. is second to none in the British Army."

The Corporal looked as if he would like to have confirmed the Mayor's statement had he not remembered that professional etiquette required so delicate a topic to be left exclusively to civilians.

Sally and Ethel went after awhile, and Josiah led the Corporal across the hall to what he called "his snuggery," wherein he considered his business affairs

and the affairs of the City, and, although by no means a reading man, occasionally referred to the Encyclopedia Britannica and kindred works. He was at pains to dispose the Corporal in comfort near the fire and then gave him an excellent cigar and insisted on his smoking it.

At first little passed between them in the way of words. They smoked in silence, but the Corporal could not help thinking, as he delicately savored the best cigar he had ever held between his fingers, how much prosperity had improved "the Mester." He was so much mellower, so much more generous than of yore. His outlook on the world was bigger altogether; the Corporal's own outlook was larger also; somehow, he had not the heart to resist the peace overtures of his father-in-law.

Said Josiah at last, pointing to the Corporal's leg: "A longish job, I expect."

The doctors seemed to think it might be. Still it had got the turn now. It was beginning to mend.

"I've been wondering," said the Mayor, "whether it mightn't be possible to get you transferred to munitions. Johnson and Hartley are short o' foremen. Pound a day to begin with. What do you say, my boy?"

The Corporal gazed into the fire without saying anything.

Said the Mayor, half apologetically, "You're not so young as you were, you see. Forty-three, they tell

me, is a bit long in the tooth for the trenches. And you've done your bit. Why not give some o' the younger ones a chance?"

In silence the Corporal went on gazing into the fire.

"Anyhow it might be worth thinking over."

The Corporal removed the cigar from his mouth and appeared laconically to agree that it might be worth thinking over. But the suggestion didn't seem to fire him.

A deeper silence followed and then said the Mayor with a certain gruff abruptness which was a partial return to the old manner, "I'm thinking it'll be a good thing for Melia to quit Love Lane. She's not done so bad with the business lately, but it might be wise to sell it now. And she'll be none the worse for a rest in country air. Happen I told you that back in the spring I bought that cottage up at Dibley that that artist chap—I forget his name for the moment—used to come and paint in. Rare situation—sandstone foundation—highest point in the county—see for miles from his studio at the end o' the garden. Don't quite know why I bought it except that it was going cheap. An old property—nobody seemed to fancy it—but the freehold is not going to get less in value if I'm a judge o' such matters and the place is in pretty good condition. Suppose, my boy, you and Melia moved in there? Save me a caretaker, and some o' the finest air in Europe comes down the valley of the Sharrow."

The heart of the Corporal leaped at these amazing words, but his eyes were still fixed upon the fire.

"What was the name o' that artist chap? A local man, but quite well up, they tell me."

"Stanning, R.A." Something hard and queer rose in the Corporal's throat.

"That's the jockey—Stanning, R.A. Now I remember . . . a rare dust there was in the Council some years ago when the Art Committee bought one of his pictures for . . ." The Mayor drew heavily at his cigar . . . "for . . . dram it! I'm losing my memory. . . ."

"A thousand guineas," the Corporal whispered.

"Something like that. Something extortionate. I remember there was a proper dust when the Council got to know of it. All very well to encourage local talent, I remember saying, but a thousand guineas was money. Maxon the curator resigned."

The Corporal kept his eyes on the fire.

With a rich chuckle the Mayor turned over the cigar in his mouth at the memory of old battles in the Council Chamber. "The fur flew for a bit, I can tell you. He wasn't an R.A. at that time and the poor chap's gone now so happen he'll begin to rank as an old master. They tell me fabulous sums are paid for these old masters, so one o' these days Stanning, R.A., may grow into money and the City'll have a bargain after all. But I don't pretend to understand such things myself. A brave man, anyway. Joined

up with the B.B. at the beginning and was killed out yonder."

The Corporal nodded but said nothing. The Mayor went on with his cigar. "I'm trying to remember the name of another artist chap who used to live in that cottage when I was a boy. We used to jang from school on fine afternoons in the summer and go bathing in Corfield Weir. And painting by the river was an old chap with a long beard like Tennyson—you've seen the picture of Tennyson"—Josiah pointed to a lithograph of the bard on the wall behind the Corporal—"but not quite so fierce looking. Wonderful blue eyes had that old feller . . . lord love me, what *did* they call him! . . . I remember we used to throw stones at his easel. We got one right through it once, when he had nearly finished his picture and he had to begin all over again. What *was* the name of the old feller?" The Mayor fingered his cigar lovingly and looked into the fire. "Soft Billy . . . that was it. . . . Soft Billy." Josiah sighed gently. "Poor, harmless old boy. I can see those blue eyes now."

The Mayor drew gently at his cigar while the Corporal kept his eyes on the fire. "That reminds me. . . . I've got one of the old chap's pictures, somewhere." The Mayor laughed softly to himself. "Took it for a bad debt . . . quite a small thing . . . wonder what's become of it?" He grew pensive. "Must

be up in the box room." Suddenly he rose from his chair. "I'll go and see if I can find it."

The man of action went out of the room, leaving the Corporal in silent enjoyment of warmth, the tobacco and many reflections.

In a few minutes Josiah returned in triumph with a small piece of unframed canvas in his hand. He rang the bell for a duster, of which it was much in need, and when the duster had been duly applied he held the picture up to the light. "It wants a frame." The tone was indulgent but casual. "Looks like Dibley Chase to me." He handed the landscape to the Corporal who gazed at it with wistful eagerness.

"Dibley Chase was always a favorite pitch for these artist chaps. See the Sharrow gleaming between the trees?" Josiah traced with his finger the line of the river. "I like that bit o' sun creeping down the valley. Good work in it, I daresay . . . but I don't pretend to be up in such matters. Very small but it may be worth a frame. Been up in the attic at Waterloo Villa for years . . . aye, long before Waterloo Villa. . . ." Josiah took a loving puff of his cigar. "I must have had that picture when I first went to the Duke o' Wellington in March, '79. How time gets on! Had it of that lame chap who used to keep the Corfield Arms who went up the spout finally. Used to supply him with beer. Gave me this for a barrel he couldn't pay for." The Mayor laughed richly and put on his spectacles. "Can you see the name o' the

artist? What was the name o' that old Soft Billy . . . ha, there it is." The Mayor brought his thumb to bear on the right-hand corner. "'J. Torrington, 1854' . . . a long time ago. John Torrington, that was his name . . . some of his work grew in value, I've heard say. A harmless old man!"

The Mayor sighed a little and gave himself up to old memories while the Corporal held the picture in his hand. "Soft Jack . . . aye, that was his name. . . . I can see him now with his white beard and long hair . . . I'm speakin' of fifty years ago Soft Jack, yes . . . had been a good painter so they said . . . but an old man, then. Used to sit by the Weir painting the sun on the water. I've pitched many a stone at his easel . . . in the summertime after bathing."

The Corporal was too absorbed in the picture to heed the Mayor's reminiscences. Josiah laughed softly at his thoughts and chose a second cigar. "Too small to be worth much," he said. "But Melia might like it. She was always a one for pictures. We'll pop a bit o' the *Tribune* round it and she can stick it in the front parlor up at Dibley where the old boy lived and died."

XLVI

THE next morning, Monday, towards eleven o'clock, Sally dropped expertly off the municipal tram, without waiting for it to stop, at the second turn on the right past the Brewery, along the suburban end of the Corfield Road, and entered a street that she had never seen before.

Torrington Avenue was one of those thoroughfares on the edge of large cities that seem to spring into being in a day and a night. In spite of the obvious haste with which its small houses had been flung together it was not unpleasing. But when Sally was last in her native city, a year before the war, this area had been a market garden.

Number Fourteen was a well kept little dwelling in the middle of a neat row. Just as Sally reached it, an old woman with a wicker shopping basket came out of the iron gate.

"Mrs. Nixey?"

The visitor had recognized the old lady but the converse did not hold true.

"You don't remember me, Mrs. Nixey. I'm Sally Munt."

The old lady gave vent to surprise, pleasure, in-

credulity. But even then she was not able to identify one who but a few years ago had been almost as familiar to her as her own son until Sally had lifted her cap and rolled back the fur collar of her immense khaki overcoat.

"Well, I never!" The old woman's voice was shrill and excited. "It *is* Miss Munt. I *am* pleased to see you, my dear." The distinguished visitor suddenly received a peck on a firm brown cheek. "He knows all about you. I read him the account of the doings at the Floral Hall. He wanted to be there, but the Doctor thought it wouldn't be good for him. It *is* kind of you to come and see him . . . It'll please him so."

Sally cut the old lady short with a brief, pointed question or two. He was very well in health except that he couldn't see, but he was always telling his mother that he was quite sure he would be able to see presently, although Dr. Minyard had told her privately that he couldn't promise anything.

The old lady led the way along the short path and applied a latchkey to the front door. As it opened, Sally caught the delicately played notes of a piano floating softly across the tiny hall.

"He plays for hours and hours and hours," said the old lady. "Your dear father has just given him a beautiful new piano. He's been such a friend to Harold. Wonderful the interest he's taken in him."

She opened the door of a small sitting room, whence

the music came, but the player wholly absorbed did not hear them enter.

"Harold, who do you think has come to see you!"

As the piano stopped and the musician swung round slowly on his stool, Sally shivered at the pallor of the face and the closed eyes. She saw that tears were trickling from them.

"Miss Munt has come to see you." There was excitement in the voice of the old lady. "You remember Miss Sally of Waterloo Villa. And to think what we've been reading about her in the *Tribune!*"

The musician sprang up with a boy's impulsiveness. "You don't say, Mother—you don't say!" The eager voice had a music of its own. "Where are you, Miss Sally?" He held out his hand. "Put your hand there and then I shall believe it."

Sally did as she was asked.

"Well, well, it's really the great and famous you." He seemed to caress that strong and competent paw with his delicate fingers.

She couldn't find the courage to say anything.

But he did not allow the silence to become awkward. "Better go and look after your coupons, Mother, while Miss Sally and I talk shop."

Upon that plain hint the old lady went away, closing the front door after her, and then the blind man helped the visitor to take off her heavy coat and put her into a chair. He found his way back to the music stool without difficulty, but in sitting down he

brushed the keys of the piano with his coat sleeve.

"Your dear, good father gave me this. A wonderful improvement on the one we've scrapped. Did you hear me murdering Beethoven as you came in? One's only chance now to score off the poor blighters!" His cheerfulness, his whimsical courage, were amazing to Sally. "Since last we met things have happened, haven't they? South Kensington Tube Station, December, 1913. Æons ago." He sighed like a child. "By the way, tell me, did you get a letter I sent to you when you did your 'go' of time?"

Sally had received the letter. Soft the admission and also blushing, although he could not see that.

"Wasn't meant as an impertinence, though perhaps it was one. Always doing the wrong things at that time, wasn't I? And I'm saying 'em now. Born under bad stars." He laughed a little and paused. "Jove! what wonderful things you've done, though."

"I've had luck." Her voice was firm at last.

"Not more than you deserve. Hell of a time in Serbia . . . must have had. Don't know how you managed to come through it."

"Just the stars." Sally laughed a little now. But never in her life had she felt so little like laughing. She remembered that she used to think him a bounder; she remembered how much his proposal had annoyed her. Yet he was just the same now—the same Harold Nixey—only raised to a higher power. Once

she had despised his habit of thinking aloud, yet now it almost enchanted her. . . .

But she was not very forthcoming. He seemed to have to do the talking for both. "Fritz beginning to get cold feet, do you think?"

She didn't think so.

"What are you doing now?" It was the dry tone of the professional soldier.

"I'm detailed for special duty in France." The tone of Sally was professional also.

He sighed a gentle, "When?"

"Off to-morrow."

He sighed again.

"It was not until last evening,"—her voice changed oddly—"that I heard you were at home."

"Nice of you to come and see me," he said. "You must excuse the room being in a litter." There was a table in the center on which was a drawing board, geometrical instruments, many sheets of paper. "I've been trying to work. I'm always trying . . . but . . . you need eyes to be an architect . . . you need eyes."

Sally was suddenly pierced by the thought of his ambition and his passion for work. He was going to do so much, he had begun so well.

"I have an idea for a new cathedral for Louvain. Been studying ecclesiastical architecture for years in my spare time." As he paused his face looked ghastly. "It's all in my head . . . but . . ."

"Is it possible"—she could hardly speak—"for any one to help you—in the details, I mean?"

"They would have to get right inside my mind . . . some one practical . . . yet very sympathetic . . . and then the chances are that it wouldn't work out."

"It might, though."

"Somehow, I don't think so." He was curiously frank. "I tell myself it might, just to keep going. There's always the bare chance if I get the right person to help me . . . some one with great intelligence, great insight, great sympathy, yet without ideas of their own."

"You mean they wouldn't have to know too much?"

"That's it . . . not know too much. They would have to sink their individuality in . . . in one who couldn't. . . . Your father suggested a partnership. But it wouldn't be fair, would it? Besides I should be terribly trying to work with . . . terribly trying . . . perhaps impossible."

"Do you think you would be?"

"In a partnership, yes. It couldn't answer. I'm so creative. . . . I have always to stamp myself on my work . . . if you know what I mean. Then . . . as I say . . . I don't know yet . . . that . . . I can pick up all the threads that have been. . . ."

"You need," said Sally slowly and softly, "some intelligent amateur, capable of drawing a ground plan, who would give himself up to you."

He threw up his head eagerly. "That's it . . .

somebody quite intelligent . . . but without ambition . . . who would"—the voice began to tail off queerly —"have the courage . . . not to mind . . . the ferocious egotism . . . of the . . . baffled." Suddenly he covered his face with his hands.

"It wouldn't take me very long to learn the rudiments, I think," said Sally. "I'm rather quick at picking up the things that interest me. It would be enormously interesting to see what could be done with this —this——"

"But you are off to France to-morrow."

"The war won't last forever."

The tone of her voice startled him. His heart leapt queerly. There was a time, not so long ago, when he would have given his soul to have surprised just that note in it. He began to shake violently.

With all the will his calamity had left him he strove to hold himself in. Her voice was music, her nearness magical; what she offered him now was beyond his wildest hopes. Once he had jumped at her too soon, in a moment of delirium; but he had always known, by force of the strong temperament, that was such a torment to him now, that she was the only woman in the world he would ever really care for.

"I see just the kind of helper you need." Divinely practical, yet divinely modern! "I could mug up my drawing in a week or two and I should never know enough to want to interfere with anything that mattered."

He held himself tensely like one who sees a precipice yawning under his feet. "America coming in, do you think?" It was a heroic change of voice. "I wish she would. I'm afraid it may be a draw without her."

Sally, with all her ribbons and her uniform, could rise to no immediate interest in America.

"Our poor lads have had an awful grueling on the Somme. Seven hundred thousand casualties and nothing to show for it so far."

"I know." The sightless eyes were lacerating her. "They ought to help us. It's their war as much as it's ours."

"We can't blame them for staying out. Can't blame anybody for staying out. But we'll never get the right peace unless they help us."

"Some people think they'd not make much difference."

"My God!" It was the vehemence she used not to like. "They'd simply tip the scale. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"I have. Some country, America. They've pinched our best Torrington, curse them . . . not that that took me there. One afternoon, though, I happened to be looking for it in a moldy, one-horse museum just off Washington Square—I forget the name of it—when I walked straight into the arms of dear old Jim Stan-

ning who had actually come all the way from Europe on purpose to gaze at it."

Sally emitted becoming surprise.

"If you read that in a novel you'd say it was the sort of thing that doesn't happen. But it did happen. Fancy old Jim coming all those miles by flood and field to look at a strip of canvas not as big as that drawing board. 'The Valley of the Sharrow on an afternoon in July.' By the way, did you ever happen to meet him?"

Sally had never met Stanning the painter.

"One of the whitest men that ever lived. Lies out there. A great chap, Jim Stanning. Another Torrington almost for a certainty . . . although he doubted himself, whether he was big enough to fight his own success. See what he meant?"

It thrilled him a little when he realized that she did.

For an instant the extinguished eyes seemed to well with light. "That picture of his, 'As the Leaves of the Tree,' carries technique to a point that makes one dizzy. Some say technique doesn't matter, but there's nothing permanent without it." He sighed heavily. "Of course the undaunted soul of man has to shine through it. And that's just what Jim Stanning was—an undaunted soul. Dead at thirty-nine. We shan't realize . . . if we ever realize . . . however. . . ."

Overcome by his thoughts for a moment, he could not go on. Sally sat breathing hard.

"If I were a rich man, as rich as Ford or Carnegie, I'd buy that picture of old Jim's and send it to them in Berlin. Some day it might help them to ask themselves just what it was that brought the man who painted it, a man who simply lived for beauty, to die like a dog, half mad, in a poisoned muckyard in Flanders."

Suddenly he stopped and the light seemed to die in his face. Then he turned round on the piano stool and broke delicately into the opening bars of the haunted, wild and terrible Fifth Symphony. For the moment he had forgotten that Sally was there.

She got up from her chair and came to him as a child to a wounded and suffering animal. Putting an arm round his clean but frayed collar she kissed his forehead.

"I shall come and see you again . . . if I may."

His sightless flesh seemed to contract as he lifted his thin hands from the keyboard. "Don't!" he gasped. "Better not . . . better not . . . for both of us."

She knew he was right and something in her voice told him so. ". . . If I may," she repeated weakly.

He didn't answer. She pressed her lips again upon his forehead, then took up her coat and went hastily from the room.

The old woman was in the act of turning the latch-key in the front door. She had got her coupons and was returning in triumph with a full basket.

"Not going, Miss Sally, are you? I should like

you to have seen his decorations—D.S.O. with two Bars and such a wonderful letter from the General."

"I'm afraid I simply must go, Mrs. Nixey. Off to France to-morrow, and I've got to pack."

"Yes, my dear, I suppose so. Very good of you to come and see him."

"Don't say that."

At the sight of Sally's eyes the voice of the old woman changed suddenly. "He thinks, my dear, he'll get better . . . he quite thinks he'll get better . . . but . . . but, Dr. Minyard . . ." Again the voice of the old woman changed. "Ah, there he is playing again. How beautifully he does play, doesn't he? Hours . . . and hours . . . and hours. So soft and gentle . . . the bit he's playing now reminds him of the wind in Dibley Chase. Yes, and that bit too . . . he says it makes him see the sun dancing along the Sharrow on an afternoon in July. Beautiful piano! So kind and thoughtful of your dear father! He quite thinks . . . he'll . . ."

XLVII

THE Corporal's leg was a long time getting well. First it came on a bit, then it went back a bit; but the process of recovery was a painful and a tardy business. Still it was much softened by the judicious help of others. By the interest of the Mayor of the city, whose model hospital on The Rise and its last word in equipment meant access to more than one influential ear, Corporal Hollis in the later stages of a long convalescence had the privileges of an out patient.

These privileges, moreover, were enjoyed in ideal conditions. Early in April, Melia was installed at Torrington Cottage, Dibley. To the secret gratification of her family, the business in Love Lane was given up, and Melia's checkered life entered upon a new phase amid surroundings wholly different from any it had known before.

At first the change seemed almost too great to be enjoyed. After the gloom, the semi-squalor, the hard toil of Love Lane, it was like an entrance into paradise. And when, at the end of that enchanted month of April, the Corporal joined her in the new abode, Melia's cup of happiness seemed quite perilously full.

That was a summer of magic days. For weeks on end they lived in a dream that had come true. To Melia the well appointed house, the beautiful surroundings, the bounty of her father were sources of perpetual amazement; to the Corporal the extensive garden, so gloriously stocked with flowers, fruit and vegetables, was a thing of delight; above all, the tower at the end of it, commanding on every hand his lovely native county, was a sacred thing, a temple of august memories.

The Corporal sunning himself and smoking his pipe by the south wall, where the peaches grew, could never have believed it to be possible. Melia, tending the flowerbeds and the grass, at the end of a not-too-strenuous summer's day, felt somehow that this was fairyland. Yes, their dreams of the long ago had more than come true. And, crowning consummation, in the eyes of each other, they were honored husband and cherished wife.

The Corporal was a long time getting well, but in that he was obeying instructions. Those most competent to speak of his case had told him not to be in a hurry; otherwise he might be permanently lame. And he was entitled to take his time. He had done his bit. Moreover, as his father-in-law assured him, it was the turn of younger men to "carry on." He had been through more than a year and a half in the trenches amid some of the cruelest fighting of the war; he was entitled to wear two stripes of gold braid

on his sleeve. If any man could nurse a painful injury with a good conscience that man was Corporal Hollis.

In spite of searing memories, in spite of the whole nation's anxieties, in a measure made less, yet not wholly dispelled by the entrance into the war of a great Ally, the Corporal was allowed a taste of those half-forbidden fruits, Poetry and Romance. At such a time, perhaps, with the issue still undecided and the trials of the people growing more severe every week, the gilt on life's gingerbread should have been denied him altogether. And yet by dogged pluck he had earned that guerdon, and Melia by her simple faith was worthy to share it with him.

The famous erection at the end of the garden, a weathercock at its apex, a course of bricks and twelve stone steps at its base, was haunted continually by an unseen presence. And it was a presence with whom the Corporal long communed. Many an odd hour between sunrise and sunset, a humble disciple of the Highest, pencil or brush in hand, strove with hardly more than infantile art to surprise some of the secrets of woodland, stream and hill.

No wonder that at that particular corner, where mile upon lovely mile of England rolled back to the frontiers of three counties, two of her greatest painters had gloried in Beauty and drunk deep. The lights tossed from the sky to the silver-breasted river gleaming a thousand feet below and then cast back again

were so many heralds and sconce-bearers for those who had eyes to see.

When the Corporal was not being wheeled round his enchanted garden, or was not smoking his pipe in the sun, he was sitting with his back to the weather, drawing and painting and dwelling in spirit with the genius of place and, through it, with one immortal friend.

Autumn came and the Corporal still needed a crutch. But he could get about the garden now and even pluck the weeds, although not yet able to dig. And he was so happy that he didn't chafe against the slow recovery. He needed rest and he had earned it; of that there could be no question.

Meanwhile the months passed and events moved quickly. The war, to which no glimpse of an end was yet in sight, continued to press ever more severely upon all sections of the population. There was a shortage of everything now except the spirit of grim determination. It was a people's war, as no war had ever been, and the people, come what might, were set on winning it.

In November the signal compliment was paid Josiah of electing him to office a third consecutive year. If anything, his second term had enhanced his prestige; his authority in the city of Blackhampton was greater than ever. More and more did he seem to be the man such abnormal times required. And the Mayoress, although under the constant threat of dis-

solution throughout a strenuous year, was still in the land of the living. Looking back on what she had suffered, the fact appeared miraculous; and yet as the end of the second term drew near, had she been quite honest with herself, she might have been tempted to own that she was none the worse for her experience. In some ways, although the admission would have called for wild horses, she might almost be said to be the better for it. Gertrude Preston, at any rate, openly said so.

Such being the case, Josiah did not hesitate to accept office for a third term. By now he realized that he was the best man in the city, at all events for that particular job. Everybody said so, from the Town Clerk down; and it was no mere figure of speech. Indeed, Josiah felt that Blackhampton could hardly "carry on" without him.

He was an autocrat, it was true, his temper was despotic, but that was the kind of man the times called for. It was no use having a divided mind, it was no use having a mealy-mouth. With the political instinct of a hard-headed race he had contrived to find a formula of government. He could talk to Labor in the language it understood; and the employers of Labor allowed him to talk to them, perhaps mainly for the reason that he was not himself an employer, but a disinterested and, if anything, slightly too honest, private citizen.

Therefore, no great surprise was caused at the be-

ginning of the New Year when it was announced that the dignity of a Knight of the British Empire had been conferred upon the Mayor of Blackhampton. Sir Josiah Munt, K.B.E., took it as "all in the day's work." A democrat pur sang, yet he didn't doubt "that he'd make as good a knight as some of 'em." But the hapless Maria showed less stoicism. According to credible witnesses, when the news came to her that Lady Munt was her future style and degree, she fainted right off, and when at last the assiduous Alice had brought her to, she put herself to bed for three days.

Be that as it may, old issues were revived in that tormented breast. Horace, Doctor Cockburn, had immensely strengthened his position in the triumphant course of the preceding year, but the new situation cried aloud for Doctor Tremlett. However, the Mayor telephoned to his sister-in-law "to come at once and set her ladyship to rights," the call was promptly obeyed by the dauntless Gerty, and the crisis passed.

XLVIII

THE early months of the year 1918 saw the entire Allied Cause in the gravest jeopardy. Even a superficial study of facts only partially revealed has made it clear that disaster was invited by an almost criminal taking of chances. The time is not yet for the whole truth to be known. Meanwhile the muse of history continues to weave her Dædalian spells. . . .

On the last Sunday morning of that momentous and terrible March the Mayor sent his car to Torrington Cottage. Melia and her husband had been invited to spend the day at Strathfieldsaye. For several months the Corporal had been working at a new aerodrome along the valley, which happened to be within easy reach of his tricycle. His last Medical Board had proved that his leg was still weak and in its opinion not unlikely to remain so. But he had not been invalided out of the Army, as there was still a chance that presently he might be able to pass the doctor; at the same time, having regard to his age and the nature of his injury, he had a reasonable hope of getting his discharge whenever he cared to apply for it.

More than once had Melia urged him to do so. Her arguments were strong. He was not a young man and he had already "done his bit"; they were very happy together in their charming house; and her father had said that it would continue to be theirs as long as they cared to live in it. The Corporal, however, could not quite bring himself to quit the Army, even had such a course been possible. Something still held him. He didn't know exactly what it was, but even now that the chance had been given him he was loathe "to cut the painter." Pride seemed to lie at the root of his reluctance. Melia felt it must be that. But the Corporal knew that alchemies more potent were at work.

On this fateful Sunday in March, after the midday meal, as he sat smoking one of his father-in-law's cigars in the little room across the hall he realized that pressure was being brought to bear upon him to make a decision. Moreover, in Josiah's arguments, he heard the voice of his wife. Melia had lately astonished the world with the news that she was expecting a baby. The fact was very hard to credit that she was now preparing clothes for her first-born. A nine days' wonder had ensued. Such a thing was almost beyond precedent, yet, after all, Dame Nature had been known to indulge in these caprices! The startled, fluttered, rather piqued Mrs. Doctor, after consultation with her lord, was able to furnish instances. Still, it was remarkable! And it lent much

cogency to Melia's desire that the Corporal should now apply for his discharge from the Army.

This afternoon it was clear that Josiah was pleading Melia's case. There was an excellent billet waiting for the Corporal at Jackson and Holcroft's if he cared to take it. They offered short hours and good pay. Why not? He was still going a trifle lame; the Medical Board was not likely to raise any objection; and it would be a relief to Melia who ought to be considered now.

The Corporal, however, shifted uneasily in his chair. All through luncheon he had seemed terribly gloomy; and, if anything, his father-in-law's arguments had deepened the clouds. One reason was, perhaps, that Josiah himself was terribly gloomy. The whole country was terribly gloomy. It had suddenly swung back to the phase of August, 1914.

The simple truth was that disaster was in the air. A crushing blow had fallen, a blow doubly cruel because so long foreseen and, therefore, to be parried if not actually prevented.

"Over a wide front the British Army is beaten!" Such was the enemy message to the Sunday papers. "Ninety thousand prisoners and an enormous booty have been taken!" And the greatest disaster in the long history of British arms was confirmed by the artless official meiosis. "Our Fourth and Fifth Armies have retired to a previously prepared position." It omitted to state that the position was some thirty

miles nearer Paris, but that fact received confirmation from the French communiqué in the next column, "The capital is being bombarded by long-range guns."

No day could have been less propitious for Melia. And after the Mayor had sat smoking a few minutes with his gloomy son-in-law he appeared to realize the state of the case. As the Corporal drew at his cigar in a silence that was almost morose, Josiah's own thoughts and feelings began to take color from their surroundings. He lapsed into silence also. It seemed to come home to him all at once and for the first time in his life that he had been guilty of impertinence. This little man with his bloodshot eyes and few struggling wisps of gray hair, with his twitching hands and his air of smoldering rage, had been through it. Even to have been Mayor of Blackhampton three years running was very little by comparison. Josiah was man enough to feel keenly annoyed for having allowed his tongue so free a rein.

There came at last a deep growl from the Corporal. It was the note of an old dog, whose life of many battles has not improved his temper. "If the bloody politicians will interfere!"

The words found an echo in the heart of the Mayor. Sinister tales were rife on every hand. And of his own knowledge he was aware that there were hundreds of thousands of trained men in the country at that moment whose presence was most imperatively

called for on the perilously weakened and extended British line to France.

"Goin' to call up the grandads, I see," said the Corporal, grimly.

"Aye!" The Mayor laughed bitterly. "Fat lot o' use they'll be when they've got 'em. Muddle, muddle, muddle." Like the Corporal, he was in a very black humor. "It's a mercy the Yankees are with us now —if they are not in too late."

"Fancy muckin' it," said the Corporal, "with the game in our hands. A year ago we'd got 'em beat."

"Press government," said Josiah savagely.

The Corporal proceeded to chew a good cigar. "Dad," he said at last, and it was the first time in his life he had addressed his former employer so familiarly, "I'm thinking I'll have to go before the Medical Board again."

Josiah combed an incipient goatee with a dubious forefinger. "But, my boy, from what you told me, you thought you could get your discharge any time you liked to ask for it."

"That was back in January."

"You're no fitter now than you were then, are you?"

The Corporal slowly stretched his right leg to its full length, and then, gathering it under him leant his whole weight upon it. "I'm much firmer on my pins than I was then." His rough voice suddenly regained its usual gentleness. "Work seems to suit

me." He laughed rather wryly. "I expect the Board'll pass me now—if I ask 'em to."

It was the turn of Josiah to maltreat his cigar. "Not thinking of going back into the Line, are you?"

"If they'll take me." The Corporal spoke slowly and softly. "And I daresay they will—if I ask 'em polite."

Josiah's keen face was full of queer emotion. "Not for me to say anything." But he had been charged with a mission by the urgent Melia. No matter what his private feelings let him not betray it! "Seems to me, my boy, although it's not for me to say anything, that no one'll blame you, after what you've been through, if you stand aside and make room for others."

The Corporal extended both legs towards the fire. He gazed into it solemnly without speaking.

"Well, think it over, Bill." The voice of the tempter. "No one can blame you, if you stick to your present billet, which suits you so well—or even if you go into munitions at a good salary. You'll have earned anything they give you. And in a manner o' speaking you'll still be doing your bit. But as I say . . . it's not for me. . . ."

Strangling a groan, the Corporal rose suddenly from his chair, "I must think it over." He threw the stump of his cigar into the fire. "You see, I don't like leaving the Chaps." The voice of the Corporal sank almost to a whisper.

The Mayor gave his guest a second cigar and chose another for himself. But he didn't say anything.

"You see—as you might say—I've had Experience."

The Mayor looked a little queerly at the Corporal. Then he took a penknife out of the pocket of a rather ornate knitted waistcoat and dexterously removed the tip from his cigar.

"I've had Experience." The Corporal sighed and sat down heavily in his cushioned chair. He fixed his eyes again on the fire.

The Mayor applied a lighted spill to his cigar and then in silence offered it to the Corporal. But the Corporal's cigar was not yet ready for smoking.

"If I do go"—the voice of the Corporal was soft and thick and rather husky—"you'll . . . you'll. . . ."

His father-in-law nodded. "Don't you worry about that. I'll see *her* all right."

Josiah took out his handkerchief and blew his nose violently.

XLIX

THAT evening, about nine o'clock, when Melia and the Corporal returned to Torrington Cottage, they found a cosy fire awaiting them in the charming sitting room, an act of grace on the part of Fanny, a handmaiden from the village, for the evenings were chilly They sat a few minutes together and then Melia retired for the night after having drawn a promise from the Corporal that he would not be long in following her example.

Alas, the Corporal did not feel in the least like going to bed. There was a decision to be made. In fact he had half made it already. But the good wife upstairs and the very chair in which he sat had cast their spells upon him. Gazing into the heart of the fire he realized that he was deliciously and solidly comfortable. All his days he had been a catlike lover of the comfortable. In the first instance it had been that as much as anything that had so nearly undone him. Conflicting voices were urging him, as somehow they always did, at critical moments in his life.

This beautiful room with its old furniture, its china, its bric-a-brac, its soft carpet, its one rare landscape upon the wall was an enchanted palace. Even

now, after all these months of occupation, it seemed like sacrilege to be sitting in it. But it was a symptom of a changed condition. This lovely place with its poetry and its elegance was a dream come true. And the honor and the affection with which a world formerly so hard and so supercilious surrounded him now made life so much sweeter than ever before.

Sitting there in front of a delicious fire he felt that the peace and the beauty all about him had entered his soul. He had a right to these languors; he had purchased them with many unspeakable months of torture and pain. No one would blame him, no one could blame him if he left the dance to younger men. Suddenly he heard a little wind steal along the valley and he shivered at the image that was born upon its whisper. Just beyond these cosy, lamplit walls was Night, Chaos, Panic. Outside the tiny harbor he had won at such a price was all hell let loose.

He heard the awful Crumps, he could taste the icy mud they flung over him, he was plunged again in endless, hideous hours, he could see and feel the muck, the senseless muck, the boredom, the excruciating misery. The wind in the valley grew a little louder and he shuddered in the depths of his spirit.

The crocuses were out in the fields by the river. Next week would be April, the time of cloud, of glowing brake and flowering thorn, of daffodils and miraculous lights along the Sharrow. The little picture

over the chimneypiece, which he had copied three times in his long convalescence, showed what April meant along the Sharrow. Friendship had taught him something, had given him eyes. He had been initiated into the higher mysteries. Beauty for the sake of Beauty—the world religion of the future—had been revealed to him. The sense of it seemed to fill him with passion as he gazed into the fire.

"Auntie!" Surely there was a voice in the room. Or was it the little wind outside softly trying the shutters? "Auntie!" It was there again. He got up unsteadily, but in a kind of ecstasy, half entrancement, half pain, and crossed to the French window. Very gently he slipped back the bolts and flung open the door. The darkness hit him, but there was nothing there. He knew there was nothing there, yet in his old carpet slippers he stepped out gingerly on to the wet lawn. The air was moist and mild and friendly, and as his eyes grew used to the mirk the rosebushes and the fruit trees took shape on either hand.

The shafts of light from the room he had left guided him across the grass as far as the path which led to the tower at the end of the garden. As soon as his feet were on the gravel he thought he heard the voice again. Of course it couldn't be so. It was only the wind along the valley. And yet . . . no . . . if the wind wasn't calling . . .

The gaunt line of the many-windowed tower loomed

ahead. Less by calculation than by instinct he suddenly found the lowest of the twelve stone steps which led to its high door—in that darkness he couldn't see it, and if he had seen it there was not the slightest reason for ascending, but just now he was possessed. Step after step shaped itself with a kind of intelligence to his old waterlogged slippers, the damp knob of the door came into his hand.

The door was locked. Silly fool he was! Must be cracked anyway! But the starched cuff of his best Sunday shirt had got entangled with something. The key, of course. It had been left in the lock. Careless to leave it like that.

Of a sudden the door came open. The ghostly abyss within smelt very damp and cheerless. Ought to have had an occasional fire there during the winter months. He felt his way cautiously in and his eyes adjusted themselves to the grimmer texture of the darkness. The chill made his teeth chatter. He felt in his pockets for a match, but he hadn't got one; he moved gingerly forward, past a wooden table and a wicker chair; the spectral outline of an unshuttered window confronted him.

Outside was nothing but the wind in the valley. He couldn't see a yard beyond the glass. The chill of the musty place was settling into his bones. What a fool not to be in his comfortable bed! But . . . a voice was still whispering. There *was* something . . . somewhere. . . .

The wind was just like the little wind along that damned Canal. No wonder his teeth chattered. And then right out in the void he saw a star. It was so faint, so far beyond the valley and the wind's voice that he was not sure it was a star. But as he stood looking at it the voice seemed to come quite close.

"Auntie . . . Auntie. . . ."

"That you, Jim . . . here I am, boy. . . ."

. . . Only a fool would stand with chattering teeth, in carpet slippers, at a goodish bit past midnight, talking to something that wasn't there. . . .

Somewhere in the darkness there was a presence. Perhaps it was outside the window. He felt his way back to the open door, as far as the veiled peril of the twelve stone steps. It was so dark that he couldn't even see the topmost; there was not even a railing for such an emergency; a single false step and he would break his neck.

Queerly excited he stood poised on the threshold, feeling into space with one foot. The wind was in the garden below him. And then oddly, at a fresh angle, over by his left hand, he caught a glimpse of the star. He swayed forward into the void but the lamp of faith had been lit in his eyes. His taut nerves awoke to the fact that he was really descending the unseen steps one by one and that he was counting them. If he didn't take extraordinary care he was very likely to kill himself, but the care he was taking seemed by no means extraordinary.

His old carpet slippers were shuffling along the gravel at last. He could make out a line of currant bushes by which ran the path to the house. As he moved forward the wind died away in the valley and he lost sight of the star. But he knew his way now. Pent up forces flowed from him through the wall of living darkness. "I'm coming, Jim!" he muttered. The wind seemed to answer him. And then he came to the end of the row of bushes and there beyond a patch of wet grass was the door of the cosy room still open with a subdued glow of lamp and fire shining beyond.

When he came in he took off his soaked slippers that they might not soil the beautiful carpet of which Melia was so proud. As he barred the door and drew the curtains across the window, the pretty old-fashioned clock on the chimneypiece chided him by melodiously striking one o'clock. He must be a fool—he had to be up at seven; but the enchanted room that was like a dream embodied cast one last spell upon him.

He had no need . . . the Chaps wouldn't expect it . . . he was forty-five. . . .

The voice was in the valley. It was a quarter past one. He raked out the last faint embers of the fire, then he put out the lamp and carried his wet slippers into the hall. After his recent adventure it was but a simple matter to find his way up the richly car-

peted stairs without a light and creep into the room where his wife slept.

She was sleeping now. So cunningly he crept into the room that she did not stir. He listened to the gentle rise and fall of her soft breath. Good woman! brave woman! He tiptoed past the bed to where the window was and managed to draw up the clever new-fangled blinds without making a sound. Yes, there was the star. That was all he wanted to see. Faint it was, so faint that faith was needed to believe that it was a star. But there was nothing else it could be.

The little sobbing voice, now no more than a whisper, that, too, was out there. Jim's voice . . . cracked he must be . . . such sloppy notions . . . the wind along that damned canal. . . .

Suddenly he turned from the star. At the beck of a queer impulse he knelt by the bed, burying his eyes in the soft counterpane. He prayed for the Chaps. He prayed for Melia. He prayed for the life that lay with her, the life coming to them so miraculously they knew not whence, after all those years.

Could it be that Jim was coming back to complete his great beginnings? Coming back to witch the world with beauty? Just a fancy. But everything was just a fancy. Jim had said so once, looking at the sunset on the bank of that canal.

And he was one who . . .

L

THE months went by. In the meantime, upon the fields of France, was being decided the fate of the world for generations to come. Day followed day whose story will echo down the ages, but in the cottage with the green shutters at the head of the valley there was little to indicate that it was a time of destiny.

The Corporal was allowed to return to his old regiment. Experience had made him doubly valuable and its ranks had been grievously thinned. After three months at the depôt he was sent to France.

When at the end of July he came home on draft leave to bid Melia good-by, her time was drawing near. And in spite of the burdens life had laid upon them, the feeling now uppermost was a subtle sense of triumph. In the final bitterness of conflict the dark Fates had given them courage to bear their heads high.

A strange reward was coming to them, bringing with it new obligations, new responsibilities. But they were not afraid. Somewhere, a Friend was helping them. It must be so, or else the dire perils to which they had been exposed would not have allowed their happiness to bear so late a flower. Besides, they had

been given a specific token that in the sum of things they mattered.

As the Corporal held his wife in a last embrace it came to him all at once that he was never to see the young life that was to bear his name. "If we can put the job through to a finish," he whispered huskily, "I'd like it to be a boy. If we can't, a girl'd be better."

She asked why a girl would be better. As usual she was not very quick in the uptake.

"The world'll not be a place for boys—unless we can do the job clean."

"But you will do it, Bill." The almost cowlike eyes expressed a divine instinct. "God won't let the Germans win."

Somehow the words shamed him, yet not for the reason that turned her own heart to fire. It was treason to the Chaps to talk of girls.

"O' course we'll make a clean job on it." He pressed a final caress upon her. "You can set there, my dear, in that nice chair all covered with wild flowers, and the door open just as it is, so that you can get a glimpse o' that old river with the sun on it and when your eyes get tired-like, my dear, you can fix 'em on that little picture over the chimneypiece opposite. See what I mean, like? There's the sun in that, too. John Torrington painted it. Look at it sometimes. We are going to win—it isn't right to think otherwise. That means a boy. And if a boy it is, I'd like him to be called Jim."

LI

CIVILIZATION was ringing with great news at the very hour that a son was born to the Corporal. But at that time he was a Corporal no longer. A letter had already reached Melia to say that "he was promoted Color Sergeant." The fighting was awful, but the Chaps had got their tails up, and the time was coming "when Fritz would be bound to throw in his hand."

It was very well, therefore, that the half comic, rather pathetic, somewhat crumpled but perfectly healthly creature snuggling up against its mother in a lovely chintz-clad bedroom looking southwest, proved to be a small but perfectly formed specimen of the human male. The delighted grandmother herself took the incredible news to Strathfieldsaye.

Josiah, who for several days past had been hard set to conceal a growing excitement, rubbed his hands with glee. "One in the eye for Park Crescent—what? Fancy . . . Melia!"

Lady Munt agreed that wonders are never likely to cease in this world.

"Mother," she never remembered to have seen Josiah so excited, "this means a bottle o' champagne." He pressed the bell and gave comprehensive orders

to Alice. "Seems to me that Victory's in the air." Secretly he had always had a grudge against Fate, that, with all his worldly success, his family could not muster one solitary male among them. "Funny thing, y' know, how you can be deceived in people. I always said that chap Hollis was a good-for-nothing. Well, I was wrong."

Her ladyship sniffed a little and wiped tearful eyes. She was in perversely low spirits, but good soup, in spite of the food crisis and good wine, which she was simply forced to drink, did something to restore her.

"Yes, you can be deceived in people." The cool trickle down Josiah's throat generated a desire for conversation. "Take the Germans. Everybody thought they were a white race. Well, they aren't. Then take the Americans. Everybody said they were too proud to fight. And, when finally they came in, people said they'd not be much use anyway. But it shows how easy it is to be wrong." Again the Mayor took up his glass. "For I tell you, Mother, those Yankees have made a difference. Since that mix-up back in March they've done wonders. The Yankees have turned the scale."

Maria had a head for domestic affairs only; she did not pretend to be wise in international matters. She sighed gently and thought of a certain chintz-clad room up at Dibley.

"Get on with it!" Her lord pointed at her glass peremptorily. "Pol Roger '04'll hurt nobody." Strong

in that faith, he lifted his own glass and bowed and beamed over the top of it. "Grandma, here's now!"

At the toast Maria hoisted a blush which brought Josiah to the verge of catastrophe. Tears, her one form of emotional luxury, came into her honest eyes.

"In a year or two, Grandma, we'll have to be thinking of your golden wedding—touching wood!" He laid a ritualistic finger upon the mahogany. "You little thought, did you now, when we started out together in that funny little box up Parker's Entry that one day you'd be My Lady? Funny world—what? I remember going to fetch the Doctor the night that gel was born. Bitter cold it was." Suddenly Josiah stopped and again took up his glass. "Wind had an edge like a knife round the corner by Waterloo Square." Then came an odd change of voice. "Did I understand you to say the gel would like me to be godfather?"

Maria understood that Melia understood that Bill would like it.

A sigh escaped Josiah. He laid down his knife and fork. "Well, well, I never made such a mistake in my life as over that chap." His voice grew humbler than Maria had ever heard it. "Shows how you can be deceived. Something big about that feller. Never made a greater mistake in my life. We'll hope he'll come through. Better write him a line, Mother. Don't suppose it's any use tryin' to send a wire."

LII

SOME weeks later, on a cold Sunday morning in November, Sir Josiah and Lady Munt drove over to Torrington Cottage. They were accompanied by Sally, on short leave from France, and by Gertrude Preston. Before the party walked across the village green to the little parish church, where a service of National Thanksgiving was to be held, it found that a matter of great importance claimed attention.

The matter was Jim. The rector of the parish had arranged to christen him that afternoon at three o'clock. Near a good log fire in the sunny embrasure of the charming little drawing-room his grand cradle had been set; and here the wonderful infant was duly inspected by his godparents.

Jim was a picture. His grandfather said he was. There was no other word. Yet even in the presence of this phenomenal youth there was but a chastened joy. He was sleeping for one thing, calmly, sweetly and superbly; and his pale, fine-drawn, yet strangely proud-looking mother was clad in the livery of widowhood.

Said Josiah in a low voice, so as not to wake the baby, "What's happened to the picture that used to

be there?" He pointed to the wall above the chimneypiece.

"It fell down, Dad." The voice of Melia was calm.

"When?"

"One night last week—the night before the news came."

"You don't say!" Josiah was not superstitious, still it was queer.

"No one was in the room when it happened. No one heard it fall. Didn't break the frame or the glass or anything. Just the snapping of the cord."

"War cord, I expect." Josiah's voice was grim. "Need a cord of a better quality to hang a certain party. Better have it put up again. Young Nixey tells me that picture may be worth a sight o' money."

Melia promised that it should be put up again. *He* always set such great store by it.

Of a sudden, Sally, who had been wholly absorbed in the contemplation of James, said, "Tell me, Father, when did you last see young Nixey?"

"Thursday—Friday. Happened to look in Friday morning as I was passing."

"How was he?"

"Wonderfully cheerful considerin'. Tries to gammon his old mother, but I guess the old lady knows. . . ."

". . . he'll never . . ."

"No, poor fellow. Wonderful pluck. Tells me he's

plannin' a cathedral . . . a cathedral, mark you . . . and stone blind."

Sally sighed a little and turned again to look at Jim. Aunt Gerty laid a white-gloved hand gently on the Mayor's sleeve. "Ten minutes to eleven, Josiah. Won't do to be late—*you* of all people. Will it Maria?"

LIII

MARIA and Aunt Gerty, carrying respectability to the verge of fashion, led the way by the path across the green to the village church. Josiah, walking with his daughters, followed ten paces behind. Wearing the tall hat of public life he looked imposing, but four and a quarter years of war had chastened him. The roll and the swagger were not what they were; four and a quarter years of incessant but fruitful labor for the common weal had molded his mind, had modified an aggressive personality.

The church, although in excess of the local requirements as a rule, was very full this morning in November. It was an hour of Thanksgiving. The goal had been reached. Victory, complete and final, had come almost like a thief in the night. And its coming had revealed, in a manner transcending even the awful dramas of old, the omnipotence of the moral law. Yet again the God of Righteousness had declared Himself in Sovereign power.

Grim perils had been surmounted by the devotion of the sons and daughters of the race, but very much remained to do. Behind the humble gratitude to the Giver of Victory, behind the sense of exultation so rightly uppermost this Sabbath morning, was in every

heart a desolating sense of the cost in human lives and a deep anxiety for the future.

The Vicar of the parish, by name the Reverend Corfield Stanning, was a white-haired man who had given soul and kin freely to the Cause. He was a son of the soil, a type of the almost extinct squarson who survives here and there in England, half landowner, half patriarch, less a scholar than a sportsman and a man of the world. For that reason, perhaps, he had the practical wisdom that books do not give. He had the instinct for affairs which men of his type seldom lack.

Victory was with the arms of Right. The people did well to rejoice. But also it was a time for prayer, for steadfast dedication to the gigantic tasks ahead. The man-eating tiger was in the net. It now remained to repair the havoc he had wrought, and to provide security for generations unborn against his kind.

Having humbly thanked the Giver, the old man prayed for his country and for those noble races of which it was the foster-mother. He prayed for all her wide-flung peoples to whom the Keys had been given; he prayed that the Pioneers of sacred liberties so long in peril, those one in name and in blood over all the wide seas, who hold Milton's faith, who speak Shakespeare's tongue may ever stand as now, shoulder to shoulder in the gate.

He prayed for all those children of men grown old and weak in bondage, whose chains had at last been

cast off. He besought the Divine grace to guide them.

Finally, he prayed for the Co-trustees of the future and that the Divine wisdom encompass them in their reckoning with a cruel and unworthy foe. He asked that mercy be extended to those who had denied it to others, not that it was in his heart to pity them in their eclipse or to spare them aught of their desert, but that the name of the Master be served, in whom lay the ultimate hope of the world, might be honored in mankind's supreme yet most terrible hour.

When the old man came to his brief and simple sermon the words of his text pierced every heart. "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

It began with commemoration of a humble hero, known to many in that church, who had given all he had to give without stint or question. And he read a letter written from the sacred and recovered soil of France by the officer commanding that Band of Brothers raised in their midst to the wife of one Sergeant William Hollis, who had died a soldier and a gentleman that his faith and his friends might live